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OR,
DUPING THE DIAMOND PRINCE.

A Story of the Streets, Sewers and Secret
Cellars of the Great City.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "DOUBLE-VOICE DAN, THE GO-IT-
ALONE DETECTIVE," "THE SPARKLER
SHARP," "THE GIANT SPORT,"
ETC., ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

"You are my prisoner, Battery Ben!"

The words were spoken by a smooth-faced, de-
termined-looking man, whose eyes were black
and piercing, and whose build was that of an
Apollo.

He was the famous "Go-It-Alone Detective,"
Double-voice Dan.

As he spoke, the detective's hand fell on the
shoulder of a heavily-built and muscular-looking
man.

IN ANOTHER INSTANT THE PONDEROUS WEIGHT WOULD FALL, AND DOUBLE-VOICE
DAN WOULD BE CRUSHED.

The scene was a pier on the East River. A new wharf was being built, and a spile-driver was at work sinking the heavy timbers into the river-bed.

Thump, thump, thump went the monster weight, settling a timber quite a foot at every blow. As regular as clock-work the weight rose and fell, while the little engine fussed and fretted about its task.

The engineer stood watching the weight, his hand ready to stop it at a signal from the foreman.

Several laborers were about the place, and Double-voice Dan had placed his hand on the shoulder of one who began work that very day. Battery Ben!

Was the man the famous crook, whose record was so well known to the police and whose picture was included in Inspector Byrnes's little collection?

Among the criminals of New York, Battery Ben was known as the most desperate and dangerous. He also had a reputation for being decidedly hard to catch and very slippery when once caught.

A raw wind swept up the river from the open ocean, and the man had felt it necessary to wear his coat while at work. The detective's fingers were fastened securely on the shoulder of that garment.

"Easy now, Ben!" commanded Dan Downing. "Don't try any of your tricks, my lad!"

But the crook did not heed the warning. Like a flash he slipped out of his coat, leaving the garment in the detective's grasp.

Then rose a cry of horror.

By a whirling thrust, at the very moment he had slipped out of his coat, Battery Ben sent Downing reeling backward to fall across the top of the spile that was being driven into the river's bed!

In another instant the ponderous weight would fall, and Double-voice Dan would be crushed to death!

Many times in his adventurous career while fighting crime had the "Ventriloquist Vidocq" been close to death, yet up to this moment he had invariably escaped. But now—

Had his time come?

It seemed thus. The workmen appeared paralyzed, as they stared at the imperiled man. But had the nearest of them been swift to act, he could not have dragged the detective from beneath the weight before it fell.

Dan was slightly stunned, but that did not increase his peril. In his most alert moments, he could not have escaped the huge mass of iron by an effort of his own.

When the weight fell, his body would be instantly crushed in twain!

It did not fall.

Of all present, but one man was able to save Dan Downing.

That man was the engineer.

Had he been less alert—less attentive to duty—less swift in his movements, the famous rogue-catcher would have perished beneath the spile-driver.

In an instant, the engine was stopped, and the mighty weight hung suspended in the air.

Had it risen another foot, it would have been released, and nothing could have stopped it.

Dazed though he was, the detective struggled to arise.

Foiled in the dastardly attempt to have Dan crushed beneath the spile-driver, Battery Ben uttered a vicious snarl and jerked out a knife, leaping upon Downing.

The ferret caught a glimpse of the glittering blade, and he knew how great was his peril. That knowledge seemed to clear away the mist that had hung for an instant before his eyes, and he grappled with the crook.

Ben made a vicious lunge with the keen blade, but the knife was not sheathed in the body of Double-voice Dan.

The detective's muscular right hand closed on the wrist of the criminal, and the thrust was checked.

But the shock of Ben's savage lunge again threw Dan backward on the timber, his head striking against one of the side-sticks as he went down.

"Curse ye!" grated the crook. "I'll do ye yit!"

He was possessed of an unusual amount of brute strength, but Dan Downing was a trained athlete. The ferret was fighting for his life just then, and therefore, he did his level best.

Nine men out of ten would have fallen an easy victim to the knife of Battery Ben, but Dan Downing was quite unlike the usual run of men.

He was stunned by the blow upon the head, but he held to the wrist of the bloodthirsty crook with a grip of steel.

Then Ben fastened his fingers on the detective's throat.

"I'll fix ye some way!" he snarled, his yellow teeth showing, and his face looking like that of a bull-dog. "You've bothered peaceable folks long enough!"

Although he tried to hold Dan down, the ferret arose from the spile.

Up to this moment, not one of the workmen standing around had seemed to realize the situ-

ation. They could not understand that a struggle for life had been so suddenly inaugurated before their eyes.

But now the foreman started toward the two men, crying sharply:

"Ketch holt here, boys! Pull these critters apart, an' hang onter 'em both!"

"Keep away!" commanded Dan, fearing the result of an interference. "I have him all right! Don't touch us!"

Had they obeyed, it would have ended all right, for the supple detective was more than a match for his antagonist, and he was swiftly getting the best of the struggle.

But, at exactly the wrong time, the men interposed between the detective and the crook, dragging them apart, despite Dan's protestation.

"Hold fast ter both!" again commanded the foreman.

Battery Ben did not propose to be held. The knife was still in his hand, and he struck out savagely with it.

One of the men was cut in the arm, and his hold on the desperate villain was broken.

In a remarkably brief space of time, the crook broke from the other man, and then he took to his heels, running along the top of a line of newly-driven spiles. From one to another of the timbers he leaped as lightly as a cat, being remarkably surefooted.

An exclamation of anger broke from Dan Downing's lips.

"Fools!" he hoarsely shouted. "You have aided him in escaping!"

Then he broke from those who had grasped him, sending the men reeling backward, and started in pursuit of the escaping ruffian.

Battery Ben paused for a moment and looked back, seeing Double-voice Dan was after him. He shook his fist at the detective, savagely crying:

"Come on, ye cursed bloodhound! You'll never take me, mind that!"

Dan drew a revolver.

"Stop!" he shouted—"stop, or I will shoot you!"

A defiant laugh was his answer, and the Battery crook continued his flight.

Dan was an expert pistol-shot, but he did not wish to use the weapon on the man if he could avoid doing so. If he attempted to wing the desperate rascal, he might kill him, and that would be a bungling piece of work.

So the chase continued.

From the pier Battery Ben leaped to a coal scow, and like a cat, he swung himself from that up to the deck of a schooner. There he halted an instant, irresolutely, as if half-determined to make a stand and fight the detective when Dan tried to follow him.

But, if such was the man's purpose, he thought better of it, for he once more took to his heels.

"Hello, hello, there!" angrily cried the captain of the schooner, starting toward the man who had so unceremoniously boarded his vessel. "What in thunder and guns do you want here? Get out of this!"

"That's exactly w'at I mean ter do," retorted Ben, as he dropped over the stern, in a light boat attached to the vessel by a painter.

The bloody knife was still in the "Battery Bird's" hand, and, with a sweep, he severed the rope. Then he dropped the knife to catch up the oars and drop them swiftly into the rowlocks, showing his yellow teeth in an ugly smile of satisfaction as he did so.

"I hain't bein' nipped ter-day," he chuckled, bending his back and sending the boat leaping away, just as Dan Downing appeared on the schooner's deck.

For one mad instant, the eluded-detective was on the point of using his revolver. He did not do so, however, but started toward another small boat, which he saw swinging from its painter from a neighboring scow.

But the race for life was not destined to be transferred to the river.

A cry of warning came from the lips of some of the spectators.

Too late!

Battery Ben sent his boat darting out past a pier just in time to fall directly in the course of a small, sharp-nosed steam launch that was cutting swiftly up the river, hugging close to the wharves.

A crash followed.

The prow of the launch crashed through the side of the small boat, the occupant of which was hurled violently into the water and instantly sunk from view.

The pilot of the little launch immediately stopped his engine, and his two companions looked for the man in the river to rise to the surface.

Those on the piers and neighboring vessels were watching for the same thing to take place.

They watched in vain: Battery Ben did not appear.

Dan secured a boat and rowed off to where the collision had taken place, and he was joined by a patrol boat of the river police. Their scrutiny for the vanished crook was useless, and they finally decided he had been stunned or otherwise injured in the accident and met his death in the river.

Were they right?

CHAPTER II.

"THE DIAMOND PRINCE."

DAN DOWNING was in his office, his only companion being his pupil and assistant, Scrimpy Stubbs.

Scrimpy was a character. He now sat with his chair tilted back at a dangerous angle, and his feet propped against the wall at an elevation considerably above his head. He was smoking a cigar.

Scrimpy was a mere boy, but his age was one of the "eternal mysteries." It was something at which he was obliged to guess, himself.

"Reckon I can't be much over seventy-five," he would observe, when questioned on that point. "I didn't have a great deal of fightin' ter do in dat Revulsionary War. Oh, I'm young yit, dough I'm terrible tough fer me age."

He was a waif of the streets, picked up by Double-voice Dan, who detected in him the making of a shrewd man. Scrimpy was still well down in his teens, but he did not like to acknowledge it. He had grown to consider himself something of a detective, and he felt as if a boy could not expect consideration and respect in that profession.

The gamin had developed into something of a dandy, and he was now attired in his best suit of clothes, a standing collar, stiff hat and bright red necktie. His hat was canted over his left ear in a peculiarly rakish manner that was distinctively his own. The shoes on his feet were patent-leathers, and the toes were of the most pointed character.

Dan had just been relating the result of his attempt to arrest Battery Ben. Scrimpy listened with interest, a queer look on his freckled face. When the detective concluded, the boy called for a sheet of paper and fountain pen.

"What do you want of them?" asked Dan.

"I'm goin' ter write."

"When did you learn?"

"Say—come off! I knows enough ter write w'at I wants ter."

"What is that?"

"Me resignation."

"Your what?"

"Me resignation."

"From what?"

"Dis firm. I hain't got no funder use fer youse."

In another moment the detective had his saucy assistant by the collar.

"You young rascal!" he cried, half-angrily.

"I believe I will shake you out of your skin!"

"Hain't better, pard," was Scrimpy's cool declaration. "Dat skin belongs ter me. Youse kin shake me outer dese clothes if yer wants ter, fer you paid fer 'em; but I puts in a big objection ter bein' shook outer me skin."

"In which case you should guard that tongue more closely."

"Do youse reckon Battery Ben has gone an' skipped de gutter?"

"Yes."

"Den I'll write dat resignation anyhow!"

"What do you mean?"

"I tink youse must be losin' yer grip."

"Why?"

"Der Battery Bird hain't croakin' in any sech way, you mind dat."

"You think he is not dead?"

"Dat's w'at's der matter."

"Oh, but you are wrong! He went down for good this time."

"Dat cove has been down fer good lots of times, but he allus pops up erg'in. He won't stay down."

"He will stay this time."

"Bet yer odds he don't. Yer can't kill Battery Ben in der river."

"But he did not come up at all. He could not live under water."

"I knows dat water must 'a' bin a big shock ter him, but I'll bet he's kickin' jest der samee. Keep yer eyes peeled fer Battery Ben; youse will hear from him erg'in."

With this oracular utterance, Scrimpy calmly resumed his smoking.

Dan paced once up and down the little room, and then he went back to his chair.

Barely was he seated when a stout, florid-faced, elegantly-dressed gentleman entered the office. The visitor was a man of sixty, at least, and his hair was quite gray, but his dress and manner gave him the air of a younger man.

"Are you Dan Downing?" he asked, addressing the detective.

"I am, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I have called on a matter of business."

"Sit down."

Scrimpy had placed a chair for the visitor, who nervously seated himself, glancing sharply at the detective's assistant.

"Please state your business, sir," said Dan.

"It is a matter of a strictly private nature," and the old gentleman still kept his eyes on Scrimpy.

"It shall be regarded as such," assured the ferret. "You may state it freely, without the least hesitation. Any confidential matter is regarded as sacred by us."

"But—but, sir, it is a family affair, and I wish to state it to you privately."

Dan smiled the least bit.

"This young gentleman is my assistant," he

explained. "You need have no fear of talking before him, for he will be silent as an oyster. If you have a case for me, it may be necessary to have him take a hand in working it out."

The visitor shook his head.

"This is a matter I really cannot afford to reveal to any one but yourself, sir. I have come to you because you have the reputation of being a private detective who is strictly honest and square—a *rara avis*, by the way. I could not afford to reveal family secrets to the general police, or to the general board of sharks who call themselves *private detectives*. By careful inquiries, I discovered there was one man in the city whom I could trust, and I am here."

Dan bowed.

"Very well, sir; it shall be as you wish. Scrumps, sneak."

"O. K."

The detective's assistant sauntered leisurely out of the office, closing the door behind him.

"Now, Mr. Prince," said Dan, "I am ready to listen."

The old gentleman started.

"You know me!" he exclaimed.

"Every one knows the Diamond Prince of New York."

"It is unfortunate to be so well known," asserted the visitor.

"In some cases possibly; but I do not see how such a thing can be in yours."

Prince coughed a bit behind a snowy handkerchief, once more glancing about.

"There is no chance of our conversation being overheard?" he asked.

"You need have no fear of that," assured Dan. "State your business."

For a few seconds the old gentleman seemed at a loss for a method of beginning. His embarrassment showed in his face and manner. At length, he said:

"I am a man who dislikes to speak of family affairs outside of my own family."

"I understand," bowed the detective. "It sometimes becomes necessary to do so, however."

"That is true—that is true," and Mr. Prince picked nervously at the handkerchief. "I am in exactly that unfortunate position."

"Whatever you may reveal to me, sir, shall be regarded as divulged in confidence. You need have no fear of any future annoyance on that account."

The diamond merchant looked relieved.

"Thank you, sir—thank you!" he exclaimed. "It is evident I am dealing with a gentleman—which is most astonishing!" he added, staring hard at Dan.

The detective could not repress a smile.

"You are evidently of the impression that gentlemen in the detective business are not common."

"I must confess I had that impression."

"And I am forced to confess your impression is correct. It is the regret of my life that a detective cannot at all times be a gentleman. It is sometimes necessary for him to become little short of a ruffian, all for the purpose of serving the ends of justice."

"But we are making slow progress."

"True—true! It is of—ahem!—of my son I wish to speak."

Dan had suspected as much.

"I have heard of him."

Mr. Prince fell back in his chair.

"So bad as that—so bad!" he muttered. "A detective has heard of him! Really, this is serious!"

"You must remember it is my business to know of almost everybody of any prominence about town."

"Of prominence! Does my son come under that head?"

"To a certain extent, sir."

"This is bad—this is *really* bad!" softly exclaimed the visitor. "And still I suspected—I knew it!"

The detective felt that they were making slow progress.

"You have not stated your case, Mr. Prince."

The diamond merchant sat up straight as a stick.

"I do not care to go into this matter any further than is absolutely necessary," he declared, with dignity. "You are a man who can appreciate my feelings."

"I think I am; and still I assure you it will be best to give me a complete understanding. I shall do much better for you than I will if working partially in the dark."

Once more Prince coughed behind his handkerchief, seeking thus to gain a little time. He seemed to literally have a horror of divulging family secrets. Dan was growing impatient.

"Two years ago," began the old gentleman, at length, "I sent Paul abroad to finish his education. I fear it was the mistake of my life. Before he left me then he was one of the best boys in all the world! I do not think I am exaggerating in saying this. He was kind and affectionate, steady and upright, and I was proud of him—too proud, I fear."

He choked a bit, but sought to disguise it with another fit of coughing. Then he seemed to suddenly brace up in a determined manner, as if he had resolved to tell the story without faltering.

"My boy had never drank or gambled, to my knowledge, and his chosen companions were among the best men of his set. His tastes were refined and delicate, in which respect he was like his mother. He often reminded me of her, though she had been dead for years. For all of his fine grain, he was a manly lad and highly respected by all who knew him."

"Paul had decided to become an artist, and he really had the artistic faculty. He did creditable work before he went abroad, and I fancied there was a great future in store for him."

"He returned home four months ago, and I regret to say there is a great change in him. He is not at all like the boy who went away. He did not stay abroad long enough to finish his studies, and he seems to have lost his ambition. Since returning, he has not touched a brush."

"But this is not the worst, sir. He has acquired serious vices. He drinks and gambles and is really reckless. The change in this respect is simply marvelous. He has turned from his former companions and chosen new associates. I deplore his choice, for his comrades of to-day are not such as I would select."

The Diamond Prince paused and wiped his perspiring face with the handkerchief in his hand.

"I should say there has been a great change in your son," said Dan. "He is now the comrade of some of the most reckless sporting characters of Gotham. He is known as Prince Paul, the Plunger."

CHAPTER III.

THE FORGED CHECK.

THE father groaned.

"So I have heard—so I have heard!" he repeated, dropping the handkerchief, but fumbling with his hands, as if he thought he still held it. "It is horrible—horrible! To think of my son—his mother's boy—becoming a gambler!"

The diamond merchant appeared crushed.

The detective fancied he could read beneath the surface, and he believed Hanson Prince had not told him all there was to tell, by any means. There was something far more serious to cause the gray-haired parent to betray so much emotion.

"It is very unfortunate," confessed the detective; "but I cannot see that it is so very serious. If you cut off the young man's supply of money, he will be forced to give up gambling and the races. You ought to be able to bring him up with a round turn."

Prince shook his head.

"I have tried—I have tried!" he declared. "But he gets money in some way."

"How?"

"Oh, he has friends who will lend him as much as he wants, knowing I am responsible."

"But you cannot be compelled to pay his debts, for he is surely more than twenty-one."

"Yes, yes—he is of age. I understand that, but I see you do not appreciate my position. I want no scandal—no talk. I love my boy, even though he is changed. I would not have him brought to trial for debt, and so I am bound to pay his bills."

"Well, it really seems strange that you should come to me in this matter. What assistance can I be?"

The diamond merchant bowed his head on his hand, discovered his handkerchief on the floor and picked it up. He hesitated about answering the question Dan had put. More than ever, the detective felt sure his visitor had not made a "clean breast."

"Look here, Mr. Prince," said Dan, quietly, "I fully appreciate your feelings and your desire to keep secret any false steps your son may have made; at the same time, it is plain you have not, by any means, told me everything you intended when you came here. What you have told me counts for very little. There is something much more serious weighing on your mind. Am I right?"

"You are."

The confession was made with reluctance.

"I thought so," nodded Dan. "Now you cannot expect me to do anything unless I know the whole truth. You will simply be baffling yourself, if you keep anything back. You have been assured you can trust me, and it is for your own interest to do so. Hadn't you better tell me all there is to be told?"

The Diamond Prince sat bolt upright.

"I think so, sir—I think so," he nodded. "I beg your pardon for not doing so at first, but—"

"Don't mention it."

"You can't understand the feelings of a parent—a father in distress. I have spent night after night of sleepless torture. I assure you, my hair has grown white with amazing rapidity since—since—" Once more he coughed behind the handkerchief, and then he went on:

"There was a sort of boy and girl love affair between my son and a certain young lady. They were both young. This was before I sent him abroad. I assure you the attachment between them gave me great satisfaction, and I had hopes of its culminating in marriage, for the girl was the daughter of an old comrade, and she was a most charming and beautiful girl."

Her father was also pleased with the prospect. The young lady's name is Vira Selwick.

"Everything seemed to go all right while Paul was in Europe, and I supposed he would be as fond of Vira as ever, on his return. But I was to be bitterly disappointed."

"Ransom Selwick was not a wealthy man but—"

The detective made a gesture that interrupted Hanson Prince.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but is this the Ransom Selwick who so mysteriously disappeared a short time ago, and of whom the police have been unable to find a trace?"

"The same."

"All right. Go on."

"As I said, Ransom was not a rich man. He might have been, for he was a genius, but he spent his days chasing phantoms. He was always studying, studying. He had a passion for experiments of a scientific nature, and he really made some astonishing discoveries, but he was not business man enough to profit by them. Had he put much study into more practical lines, he would have been a millionaire to-day."

"I have said Selwick was my friend. I did all I could for him in the past, and, although he was poor, and I rich, I was pleased at the prospect of Paul making Vira his wife. I even tried to work Selwick into my business some way, but it was no use, sir—no use. He was not a man for business, and he knew it. He was a genius, and where do you find a genius who is a successful business man?"

"There was something very odd about Ransom Selwick, something unnatural—something I noted as growing on him in late years. He was always considered a crank by those who did not appreciate him. I have said he was a genius, and somebody has proclaimed genius close allied to madness. I believe it, sir—I do. Don't you?"

"Never mind. That is of no particular importance. Selwick's disappearance was strange, singular—very singular. He was not a rich man, so it is not probable he was killed for his money. I said the oddness was growing on him when I knew him last. It was. I did not understand it, but now I think it was a phase of madness. I think he became deranged and wandered from his home. That, I believe, explains his disappearance. I have spent a great deal of money to assist in prosecuting the search for him, but he has never been found. Whether he is living or dead remains a mighty mystery—yes, sir, a mystery."

"But I have really allowed this to lead me from my story. Of course I expected Paul and Vira would be the same when he returned, but I was disappointed. He immediately broke off with her—he said he had no fancy for marrying a pauper's child. It was not like Paul—my Paul. It gave me a great shock. I do not think you can appreciate my feelings."

"Of course I remonstrated with Paul, but he laughed at me. He said the whole affair was only a silly boy and girl attachment and he was done with it forever. He was looking higher. I asked him what he meant by that, and he winked in a vulgar manner."

"The best game roosts high, father," he said. "I am not gunning for anything short of an heiress of the Four Hundred. One might as well do the proper as to waste himself."

"Well, sir, I was crushed. Not that I object to wealth or position—oh, no! I have had a hard struggle to obtain both. But Paul's mother had never had a care for either, and he had seemed so like her—once."

"Perhaps I am dragging this out. If so, you must excuse me. I am a person who talks a great deal when I am fairly started, and I pride myself that I know my failing—I pride myself on it, sir."

"Come to the point. Well, I will. It is simply this: My son is completely changed. I have told these things to impress it upon you. I fear the time he spent in Europe has quite ruined him. He has cast aside the good friends and companions of other days, and now he associates with fast men and doubtful women. I am sure it is these companions who are working his downfall."

As Prince ceased speaking, there was a puzzled look on Dan Downing's face.

"Look here," said the detective, "you started out to tell me something more than you had already done, but you have failed to impart anything of great importance. Almost any young man might have undergone such a change. It is plain your son is sowing his wild oats. Better he should do that now than later in life. But I think you still withhold something from me."

"Sir, has your son ever done a criminal act?"

The sudden question caused Hanson Prince to fall back in his chair, gasping for breath and lifting one hand appealingly.

"Sir—sir—"

He could not utter the words he wished to speak.

"I have repeatedly assured you that you might trust me," came from the detective's lips, as Dan discovered he had struck the right chord. "If you wish my services, you must do so fully. I am not a police officer, who is bound to

bring the criminal to justice. If your son has done anything wrong, it will not be my duty to make it known. You need have no shadow of fear of blackmail. Instead, I will join with you in the attempt to rescue the unfortunate young man from the clutches of the harpies who are dragging him down. I will do my level best for you, and when my bill is settled, the affair will be ended so far as I am concerned."

The Diamond Prince started up and grasped Dan's hand.

"I thank you!" came chokingly from his lips. "I believe you. I have not told all—no. It did not seem as if I could—it was like tearing my heart out."

He had thrust a trembling hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, and he drew forth a slip of paper.

"I told you I tried to check his wild career by reducing his allowance. It is true. For a time I only found it necessary to pay the debts he contracted. But this—this thing—came to me at last! I might not have discovered it so quickly, but I was looking over my accounts and—Well, here it is."

He placed the paper on the desk before the detective, and Dan saw it was a check for five hundred dollars.

"Well?"

"It is a forgery!"

"Your name is signed to it."

"I did not place it there—no, sir!"

The detective examined the check closely. It was made out to one "John Robinson" and indorsed by several persons, the last name being that of "Omer Drake."

"Who are these people?"

"I know none of them."

"You do not know a John Robinson?"

"No, sir."

"But this man Drake must have been known at the bank."

"No."

"Then how could he secure the cash on this check?"

"He was identified."

"By whom?"

"By my son!"

CHAPTER IV.

DAN TAKES THE CASE.

DOUBLE VOICE DAN whistled softly.

"This begins to grow interesting," he acknowledged.

"It is terrible, sir—terrible!" groaned Hanson Prince, twisting the handkerchief around his hands, a look of distress on his face.

"Do the people at the bank know this is a forgery?"

"No. I came near betraying the truth to them, but something kept me from doing so. I seemed to feel that my boy—my Paul, whom I would have trusted with anything not so very long ago—was in some disgraceful manner concerned. That checked me and kept me silent."

"You were very discreet. But, even though this check is a forgery, your son may not be a criminal. He may not know the check is bogus."

Hanson Prince sadly shook his head.

"I have considered that—I have thought it all over—looked at it from all sides."

"And you believe your son in some way connected with the forgery?"

"I would not believe so had I not good reason."

"You have more to tell?"

"Yes."

Again the diamond merchant fumbled in his pocket and brought forth a scrap of paper, which he placed before the detective.

Dan scrutinized the paper.

It was part of a check that had been destroyed by being torn in two.

It was, to a certain extent, nearly the counterpart of the forged check!

Dan saw that it was of great importance.

"Where did you find this?"

At first Prince choked so he could not reply, but, at length, he faintly gasped:

"In my son's room!"

"Since the forged check came to your notice?"

The old gentleman nodded.

"That settles it!" declared the detective, decisively. "Sir, your son made out this bogus check."

Hanson Prince made a gesture of despair and then sprung to his feet, wildly pacing the floor of the little office, while he struggled to suppress the emotion that was overcoming him.

Dan really pitied the man.

"Don't let this overcome you, Mr. Prince," he said. "The young man may be saved. Of course his act is of a very grave nature, but, if he is brought to see how serious it really is, he may be more careful in the future."

The father paused and faced Downing.

"There is only one way to save him," he said, thickly. "That is why I have come to you. Had I seen any other way, I should have tried to do the work myself, without trusting the wretched secret to another person."

"What is the way you speak of?"

"Paul is not naturally vicious or a criminal, sir—no, sir! It is his associates who have degraded and dragged him down. His associates are people of shady characters, and they have fastened their clutches upon him. They mean to bleed him—to ruin him! That is how it is—that's what's the matter! They are a vile, lecherous crew!"

"Well, what do you expect me to do?"

"I will tell you. These men and women have shady characters—criminal records, perhaps. You can get at the true facts of their history. I wish them forced to relinquish their hold on Paul. To do this—to compel them to unclothe their grip, they must be frightened. I want you to discover just who they are and all about them. Then I wish you to come down on them. Have them arrested, if possible; if not, frighten them by flaunting their records in their faces. Drive them away or compel them to let up on Paul. Do anything to accomplish the saving of my boy—anything!"

Dan lowered his brows and scowled at his desk. It was rather unusual task that was required of him, and he did not at once express a willingness to take hold of the case.

Mr. Prince watched the detective anxiously. At length, he could endure the silence no longer, and he exclaimed:

"You will do this? I will pay you well—anything, everything you ask! You shall have all the money you need! If you will aid me in saving my boy, you shall have eternal gratitude! If you refuse me this, to whom shall I appeal?"

"You could not safely appeal to any other private detective in this city and make the offer you have made me," was the candid reply. "In the excitement of the moment, you seem to have lost all your business faculties, Mr. Prince. Were I a shark, I could bleed you unmercifully. You are under strong excitement."

"That is true," brokenly confessed the diamond merchant. "And I thought I was so calm—so cool—when I came here. I had thought it all out ahead—just what I would say to you—just how much I would tell you. I am excited; but Paul is all I have left, and I have had great hopes for him—great expectations. I fear they will all be crushed!"

Again he sunk down in the chair, but he no longer fumbled nervously with the handkerchief. All the life seemed to have departed from him with a suddenness that was alarming. Dan was startled and feared the man would faint.

"Shall I get you some water?" asked the detective.

"No," was the hollow reply. "I want nothing. I am all right. It is passing now. We will go on with this business. I think I had better get it over soon. I wish I had come in my carriage, but I did not want any one to know I was calling on a detective."

"Never mind that. Will you try to aid me in saving my boy?"

"On conditions."

The old man stiffened up a bit.

"Conditions, sir—conditions! Am I not the one to make the conditions?"

"Not in this case. That may usually be your position, but it is not now."

Mr. Prince was not in the habit of being talked to in that manner, but he felt that he was helpless.

"What are your conditions?"

"First, that I be given my own time and allowed to work in my own way."

"I agree to that."

"Next, that my assistant be taken into confidence and given the full particulars of this affair."

"I will not agree to that, sir—no, sir!"

"Very well."

Dan handed the man the forged check and the mutilated portion of one.

"What do you mean?" slowly asked Hanson Prince.

"The business is settled."

"How?"

"I decline to have anything to do with the case."

The Diamond Prince arose stiffly, an injured look of anger on his face.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

"I do."

"You are throwing away a fine chance to make good money."

"I never touch a case unless I can handle it in exactly my own manner, sir."

Hanson Prince turned toward the door, and then turned back.

"Confound it, man!" he cried. "I have let you into the whole affair, and now you decline to touch the case!"

"Oh, no; I do not decline to touch it. I simply ask the privilege of working it as I please, and of taking my assistant on with me. He will save me valuable time, and will save you good money. He is bright, shrewd and utterly fearless. I do not think he understands the meaning of fear."

"But he is nothing but a boy!"

"A boy who is shrewder than hundreds of shrewd men—so called. I have tried him thoroughly, and know his caliber. He is close-mouthed as a clam, and you need have no fear of his betraying your secrets. Although raised

in the slums of New York, he has a most exact idea of what is perfectly honorable and square, and he hates anything mean or crooked worse than he hates poison."

Hanson Prince did not like the idea of taking Scrimpy into the secret, but when he found Dan really would not work on any other condition, he consented.

"He will play an important part in clearing up this case, I imagine," said the detective. "He is one of the most skillful shadows of Gotham. If I place him on the track of a person, he is bound to follow that individual to his hole."

Mr. Prince paid a certain sum of money down to bind the bargain, and answered a great many questions that Dan saw fit to ask, and then he took his departure.

Immediately Scrimpy came lounging in, flung himself into the chair and elevated his feet once more.

"Is it biz?" he asked, carelessly.

"Yes."

"Den youse struck der string. I knows dat bloke. He's a tight 'un. I uster stop front of his store an' count der sparklers in der winder. He'd allus send a man out ter drive me off."

"Do you know his son Paul?"

"Nixey."

Then Dan gave the boy the particulars of the case, explaining it to his assistant's understanding without wasting a word.

"Well, dis is biz," nodded the gamin, when the ferret had finished. "I like dis. W'at's me lay?"

"I want you to shadow Paul Prince while I am picking up points about him."

"Jest show me der mug, an' I'll stick ter him like a plaster."

CHAPTER V.

SCRIMPY ON DUTY.

WEBBER'S, on Sixth avenue, might be tougher than it is, but its reputation is a trifle shady. It is one of those places "winked at" by the police and known very little of by thoroughly respectable people. It might properly be classified as a "dive," but Webber himself is very careful not to carry things far enough to attract the attention of the newspapers, especially when those virtuous sheets are engaged in one of their spasmodic dive-closing crusades.

It is not necessary to make a minute description of Webber's, but there is a small back room where, at proper seasons, questionable characters are wont to congregate. Women unknown to the best society are permitted to come there at night and associate with such men as patronize the place. These women are of value to Doc Webber, for they induce their chance companions to purchase drinks liberally, and so the dollars flow into the proprietor's coffers.

Whenever a newspaper crusade is started, the little back room at Webber's is promptly closed and kept thus till the storm has fully blown over.

The bar-room at Webber's is gaudily furnished and decorated, being therefore quite attractive for drinking characters of "loud" taste. "Square" men frequently drop into the place, for good liquor is kept there, and every rounder has Webber's on his list. Sight-seers frequently take in the place. If they are "in," they obtain admission to the little back room where the "lady visitors" are allowed to congregate.

It is Doc Webber's pet boast that he is "on the square." If a man enters his place and purchases a drink, he will fight for that man before he will see him misused in any way. Doc is very careful of his "good name," for he is ambitious to have his place patronized by the "high bloods" rather than by the rabble. The only mistake he makes is in trying to keep a grip on both classes.

Standing at Webber's bar on a certain evening was a little group of three men. Two of these men had the air of sporting characters and men-about-town. Their dress, manner and talk proclaimed them such.

The third was a really handsome fellow, with yellow hair and brown eyes. He was nearly six feet tall and handsomely built, his entire figure being graceful, as well as muscular and firmly-knit. The rich tint of health was in his cheeks, and his manner showed the warm blood of manhood flowed unclogged in his veins. He was dressed in a handsome suit of gray, for the night was warm, and carried a cane of the most approved sort. His appearance contrasted strikingly with that of his two silk-hatted companions.

He was a young man known as Prince Paul, the Plunger. Having fallen into the whirlpool of sporting life, it was said he was going the downward course with alarming swiftness.

Paul was leaning back against the bar, easily smoking a cigar, and listening to the "horsey" talk of his friends—so-called. Now and then he put in a word, and the others would listen with respectful attention whenever he did so.

To an outsider, their respect might have seemed assumed.

"There's boodle in Kay Eye Jay," earnestly declared the portly man of the trio. "Old Gavin, himself, hasn't sized her up right. She's

lumbering now, and trots like a cow at the start, but she will come out of that. I tell you she is a winner, my boys!"

"Oh, come off!" put in he of the second silk hat, his face and voice expressing fine disgust. "No man living knows the beast's pedigree. She hasn't any!"

"She doesn't need it," calmly declared the first speaker. "But I think you are off when you say she hasn't any."

"How? Why, Gavin confesses he can't go back of Mollie Gray."

"Do you count Gavin a fool?"

"Of course not."

"Well, what is he blowing such a story round for?"

"Blamed if I know!"

"He'd surely be a fool if it was true."

"Then you think—just what?"

"He is being put up to this. Wait till Kay Eye Jay shows the stuff there is in her, and then—"

"What?"

"She will have a pedigree that will reach from here to Jersey."

"It looks to me," laughed Paul, "as if the only show she'd ever make would be a holy show of herself."

Whereat the less-portly of his companions laughed loudly, and declared he was dead right.

"That tickled Kelsey," smiled the third. "But you fellows may fling up your good money against Kay Eye Jay if you want to; I'll chance it the other way."

"Kiss your dollars good-by before you put 'em up," advised Paul. "You'll never see them again."

"That is sound advice for you, Wait," nodded Kelsey.

"Papers, gents? Ex-tree! All der latest sportin' news. Say, you fellers, buy one apiece an' dat'll jest clean me out. I wanter knock off biz fer der day, an' I've got t'ree left. Take 'em, will yer?"

The speaker was a rather ragged, and saucy-looking boy who had made his way in from the street. He carried two of the three papers under his arm, while he held out the third to Wait.

The newsboy was ignored.

"Say, dere!" he cried, as if astonished, looking the portly sport over. "Hain't youse Grover Cleveland? Course yer bel I know youse! How are yer? I'm goin' ter vote fer yer der next 'lection sure pop. If you hain't President, it won't be none of my fault."

This attracted the attention of the trio, and, as they happened to be in an agreeable mood, they laughed.

"Have a pape!" continued the boy, pressing one on Wait. "It don't coet you nothin'. Youse kin have anyting I own. I owe you a dead heap—I do!"

"How is that?"

"You killed me father-in-law," was the astonishing reply.

"Killed your father-in-law?" retorted the amused sport. "think you have made a slight error. I am sure I did not have any hand in the gentleman's taking off. You are wrong."

"Nixey," and the gamin shook his head.

"Youse done it."

"How?"

"By bein' defeated by Ben Harrison."

"Well, that is a strange way to kill a man. Explain."

"I never was dead stuck on der old jay w'at merried me mudder w'en merger fader croked. He uster lick der packin' out of me 'most ev'ry day. Oh, I had it in fer him! He claimed ter be a reformed boozier, an' he never took his biters wid der odder blokes. He raised bloody blue blazes 'cause I drank a glass of beer one day. He was a demmocrat clean t'rough, an' he said he'd never live ter see anodder 'publican President. He didn't really mean dat, but w'en der demmocrats was beat, he broke his pledge an' went on a toot. He fell inter a celler over on 'Leventh avenoo an' broke his neck. Dat's der way youse killed him by being beat.—Say, take dese odder papers. Day're free. Don't want ter borry a quarter, do yer?"

The three men laughed still more heartily, and the sharp little rascal found customers for his papers. Three pieces of silver were pressed into his somewhat grimy hands, and he found himself seventy-five cents better off than when he entered Webber's.

"Tanks!" he cried, ducking his head. "Youse coves be der clean w'ite stuff!" Then he retired into a corner to count his earnings.

At this moment a man with a fierce black mustache and a somewhat too florid face hastily entered the saloon and at once hastened toward the trio. Prince Paul started as his eyes fell on the new-comer.

"I want to see you a moment, Prince," said the man of the black mustache, when he had hastily greeted the others. "It is important."

The Plunger at once begged the others to excuse him, and then he followed the new-comer to a small stall-like apartment next to the back room.

"What's the racket, Rockvelt?" he anxiously asked.

"The devil's to pay!" was the retort, savagely spoken.

Then the men lowered their voices so they would not be overheard by any one outside.

It happened that the lucky newsboy was leaning against the partition of the stall, and he discovered he could hear the hum of voices from within, and catch a word now and then. He seemed to suddenly lose interest in the amount of money he had earned, although he kept fingering the coins in a mechanical fashion. He was listening closely.

"Great God!"

That was the exclamation he heard Paul Prince utter.

"Sh!" cautioned the other. "Careful!"

"When did this take place?" asked the young Plunger, only partially regarding the warning of his comrade.

"More than a week ago."

"Heavens! He may be in New York at this moment!"

"But that is not at all likely," assured the black-mustached man. Then their voices sunk so low the listening boy could not understand anything they were saying.

"Der deuce is ter pay!" muttered the lad to himself. "Dere's trouble stewart. I'd give a plank ter hear all dem mugs is sayin'."

He tried to think of some way, no matter how desperate, that he could obtain a position where he could hear all that passed between the men. He was forced to give it up and continued to listen in the corner, fearing he would be spotted by one of the barkeepers and driven from the place.

Although he could not understand the words the men were saying, it was plain enough from the inflection of their voices that both were excited.

At length a rather rough-looking man entered the saloon and asked if Bry Rockvelt had been there that evening. One of the barkeepers told him Rockvelt was in the little stall with Prince Paul. He at once hurried in that direction.

"Wonder who dat mug is," thought the boy in the corner. "Dunno 's I'm onter him. He'd better sell dem whiskers fer a fur mat."

As soon as the bewhiskered man appeared in the stall, he was greeted as "Easy Jack" by Rockvelt, and introduced to Paul as "Jack Easy."

"I have a word for you," declared Jack.

"Spit it out," invited the man of the black mustache.

Jack glanced suspiciously at Paul.

"All right," assured Rockvelt.

"Der bird at 93 has skipped," said Jack.

A cry of fury broke from Bry Rockvelt's lips, and he leaped to his feet.

The listening boy poked himself in the ribs with his thumb.

"Dis is nuts!" he softly chuckled. "Old Mustn't-touch-it is gittin' it in der neck all roun', ur me name hain't Scrimpy Stubbs, Esq!"

The newsboy was Double-voice Dan's assistant on duty.

CHAPTER VI.

COUNT FABIAN MIRABEAU.

"HEY, there! Get out of this!"

It was the voice of one of the barkeepers.

Scrimpy was discovered.

"I hain't doin' northin'," he protested. "Lemme count me money."

"Get out!" repeated the barkeeper. "Skip lively, or I will be onto you!"

"I know a cop dat's dead onter youse," retorted the boy, saucily. "If he spots yer once, you'll be playin' checkers wid yer nose der fu'st ting yer know."

"You infernal young rat!" snarled the barkeeper, as he started for Scrimpy.

The gamin skipped airily toward the door, where he paused long enough to place his thumb to his nose and wiggle his fingers at the enraged dispenser of liquors.

"See youse later, cully," he called. "Go put yer temper in soak." And then he vanished.

But Scrimpy did not go far from the saloon. On the opposite side of the street he stopped where he could watch Webber's doors.

"Got ter keep me eye out fer dat Prince Paul," he muttered. "Dat feller has fell inter mighty-low comp'ny, an' dat's der fac'. Dem blokes w'at he's 'sociatin' wid will do him in der en', an' don't be fergit dat. Dat Bry Rockvelt is mighty bad stuff, an' dat's w'at's der matter wid Hannah. If be hain't workin' der Plunger, I dunno."

"But w'at was it dat worked dem up in dat kind of a way? If I could only 'a' heerd w'at dey was sayin' arter dey went inter der stall I'd been in it wid bote feet. Dere's somet'ing on der turft—somet'ing dat dey don't like. Well, I'm goin' ter git at der hard fac's, or me name hain't Scrimps."

"An' dat last mug in whiskers—w'at was der matter wid him? He was arter Rockvelt, an' he said der bird in ninety-t'ree hed skipped. Now w'at is der bird in ninety-t'ree? I'm jest gittin' dead loads on me mind."

"Hello! Great Jim! dere's Whiskers now!"

Easy Jack came out of the saloon and hastened away down the avenue. He was alone.

"I'd like ter foller dat mug an' find where ninety-t'ree is," declared Scrimpy. "But he ain't der game I'm arter. Der boss has tole me

ter keep me wedder eye onter der Plunger, an dat's w'at I'm doin'."

So he lingered.

At length Bry Rockvelt left the saloon, and took a passing car.

Prince Paul was not with him.

At that moment the Plunger was standing at Webber's bar, just lifting a glass of liquor to his lips. As he did so, some one jostled his elbow, and a little of the liquor was spilled.

Paul was not in good humor just then, and he wheeled, with something suspiciously like an oath.

"Curse your awkwardness!" he exclaimed.

"I do beg ze monsieur's pardon!" exclaimed a smooth voice. "Eet was quite by ze accident I do zat. Eet was vera rude of me! One t'ousan' pardons I do beg! Eef monsieur will overlook ze accident, I would be please to haf him drink wiz— Mon Dieu!"

Plainly the man was a Frenchman. He had the air, manners and accent of one. From head to foot he was dressed in black, his clothes being somewhat worn but scrupulously neat and well-brushed. His silk hat was not exactly in the latest form, but it had been tenderly cared for till it shone as if just from the hatter's. His clothes were buttoned close about his well-knit figure, making him seem somewhat slenderer than he really was. In fact, by some trick known only to himself—or not known at all—he made his person appear angular and pointed. The cracked patent-leather shoes on his feet came to an extravagant point, and his black mustache and imperial were waxed to fine tapers at the extremes. He wore goggles, which concealed his eyes.

The Frenchman had been bowing with the utmost politeness, as he entreated pardon, but he suddenly stopped and stared aghast at Prince Paul.

"Mon Dieu!" he repeated.

Paul was annoyed.

"What is the matter with you, man?" he demanded. "You act as if I were a freak!"

Instantly the Frenchman held out his hand, laughing:

"Eet is Monsieur Prince! I did not know but I be deceive. I am so veraglad to see you!"

Paul accepted the extended hand in a doubtful manner.

"You have the best of me," he confessed.

"When I see you las' you haf ze best of me," smilingly bowed the Frenchman. "Eet was in Paree—you remember—in ze apartments of ze Count La Fontaine. We play at zat game—what you call heem?—zat American game—pokare. Zere were four—you, monsieur, ze count, ze Eengleesh lord, and your humble servant. I haf ze great boodal—ze big wad—you say flush. You do not drink at all—I do drink too much. It go to ze head of me; I play vera reckless—I go ze limit on ze full band. You haf ze four tray—you scoop ze board. Ha! ha! ha! I tink you remembare zat, monsieur?"

"It seems as if I do remember something about it," confessed Paul, but his manner was very doubtful.

The Frenchman nodded his head vigorously.

"You mus' be vera strange man to forget zat. You make one great pile zat night, all because you do not dreenk at all. Now I see you haf change—you do dreenk. Zat is bad. I haf change—I haf sware off—nefare dreenk some more. Eet is bad—vera bad!"

"I suppose you are right," said Paul, by way of saying something. "But a man must drink in New York if he runs with the bloods—the sports."

"Zen you do run wiz zem? Yes, you haf change. I see eet. You did not zen—you be vera morale. Ze Eengleesh lord he do haf to drag you into ze game. You do not want to play. At first ze limeet be low, zen we rise beem up—up—up. You ween all ze time—you get excite—your face haf ze flush. Mon Dieu! Ze cards you do hold! Be-e-aufull! I nevere see ze like of zem!"

"I believe I did hold great hands; I was in luck that night. But what in the world brings you over the pond?"

"You haf forgot you tell me of zis country as ze great place to make ze fortune queek, eh? Well, you do zat. I haf lose eferyting—I am ruin! Eet was ze drink and ze card. I come oware here to make anozare fortune."

"Well, well! you are in hard luck, eh? How do you expect to make a fortune in America?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders and smiled significantly.

"I brink ze titale wiz me," he replied.

"The title?"

"Oui."

"I do not understand."

Something like a look of displeasure flashed across the foreigner's dark face, but it was instantly banished by his habitual smile, and he spoke after his oily fashion:

"Eet is vera strange you should forget, monsieur. Of course you remember my name?"

Paul was obliged to confess he did not.

"Eet is vera strange," repeated the Frenchman, staring hard at the young man. "I do not understand eet."

"You would not consider it so very strange, if you lived in this country," asserted Paul, his

face flushed uncomfortably. "Here people come and go all the time. Your friends of to-day are strangers to-morrow. There is a continuous surge, and it is not strange one should forget a name as I have yours. In Paris—"

"Well, in Paree is eet not come and go? There eet is strangares, straungares all ze time. But I do not forget you, monsieur. I haf some card engrave."

He produced a bit of pasteboard and gracefully extended it to Paul. The Plunger accepted the card, on which he read—

"COUNT FABIAN MIRABEAU,
Paris."

It was plain the Frenchman had not only brought his title with him, but he was determined to display it, regardless of a small matter of good taste.

"Ah, I remember now—I remember you, count!" exclaimed Paul, with apparent impulsiveness, grasping the Frenchman's hand. "I am delighted to see you. You gave me a royal time in Paris!"

The count looked a trifle dubious over that declaration, but he allowed it to pass without comment.

"I am glad you remembre. Now, zat I deed spill your liquare, weel you dreerk wiz me?"

"But you said you had abandoned drinking."

"I only take ze seltzare for ze sociability," returned Mirabeau, with a graceful wave of his hand. "You take whatever you like, monsieur."

He then ordered drinks at the bar, taking simply seltzer for himself.

"I am glad I haf found you here in New York," he observed to Paul. "I haf need of a friend to help me geet into ze best society. Zat is my leetale game. Of course you will help me in zat, and when I do make ze capture, zen I do ze right thing by you, Monsicur Prince."

"When you make the capture?"

"Oui."

"What capture?"

"Oh, you be stupid, you pretend. Eet was for zat I do come here—I bring my titale. Zere are plenty young lady vera reech who be glad to marra a French count. Do you see, monsieur?"

"Oh, yes; you propose to barter yourself and your title for boodle."

"Oui. Boodale is ze thing I am aftaire. You will give me your assist, monsieur?"

"Well, I will think of it."

"You t'ink, eh? You had better t'ink you do so. I know something you don't want talk about in New York."

Paul flushed and started angrily.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, a trifle savagely. "Is it a threat?"

"No, no—nevare!" protested the count, effusively. "What for you take me? I do not thretun you—I warn. Zat is all, Monsieur Prince."

But Paul's hot blood was aroused.

"It is a threat in disguise!" he coldly declared.

"I am not in the habit of taking that from any one—much less a shabby Frenchman, who has nothing left but a doubtful title. Come to consider the matter, I don't know as I want anything to do with you anyway."

Count Mirabeau drew himself up stiffly, his mustache and imperial bristling angrily. Paul fancied the eyes behind the goggles were flashing, but they were well concealed.

"Monsieur," said the Frenchman, with forced deliberateness, "I am a gentleman of honaire. You bad bettaire think two time before you offend me. I know ze whole truth of zat affaire wiz Madame Danglar."

"I don't know what you are talking about," asserted Paul. "I am inclined to believe you a lunatic."

"You do know what I talk about," firmly asserted Mirabeau, without lifting his voice in the least. "I haf a hold on you—one tight hold. But I am a gentleman, and I use you ze right way eef you use me ze same. Eef not—"

He finished with a gesture and a shrug of the shoulders that was very Frenchy and very expressive. But Paul did not cool in the least; instead, every word that fell from the count's lips seemed to irritate and arouse him to a still greater degree.

"Speak your threats out like a man!" he exclaimed. "You pretend to know something about me but I doubt it. As for this woman Danglar, I had forgotten such a person existed. You will find that your knowledge will avail you nothing. We are not in Paris; this is New York. You have warned me; now let me have a turn. I shall advise you to have a care not to offend me in any way. If you bother me, I shall make you sorry. Strangers in New York sometimes vanish suddenly and mysteriously. Good-evening."

But the count laid a hand on Paul's arm as he was turning away.

"Pardon, monsieur. You go soon."

The Plunger shook the hand off, making no resort—not even glancing at the Frenchman. Then he heard these words hissed into his ear:

"Ze dungeons give up zere secrets sometime, Monsieur Prince! You haf not see ze last of me, remembre zat! Bon soir."

CHAPTER VII.

PICKING UP POINTS.

PAUL was in an ugly mood as he left the saloon. His face was black with passion, and he paused on the sidewalk to relieve his feelings by giving utterance to language that would not look at all well in print.

"Curse the infernal frog-eater!" he fumed. "I never had a man work me up so before in such a manner, and such a short space of time! What the deuce did he mean by those last words, 'Dungeons give up their secrets sometimes.' Can it be—No; no! I am foolish to think so! He knows nothing! And yet—"

A down-going train rumbled along the trestle over his head, and made the conclusion of his meditation inaudible. He was greatly disturbed, and the open air did not serve to soothe his feelings.

"I'll go back," he growled, as the roar of the train died out in the distance. "I will know exactly what he means, or I will choke the life out of his body!"

He turned back and entered the brilliantly lighted saloon, looking around for the Frenchman.

Count Mirabeau was not to be seen, and Paul made inquiries. He soon learned the foreigner had slipped out by the side door a moment before. He immediately hastened out upon the street by that door, hoping to find the count near at hand.

He was disappointed.

Mirabeau had disappeared.

"It is well for him he keeps out of my sight!" came savagely from the lips of the angry young man. "I don't like him for anything! Although his eyes were hidden by goggles, it seemed as if they read me through and through. And his manner—polite but devilish! It makes me shiver! What does the man know? Nothing that can hurt me. Still, I would not have him filling the old man's ears with his yarns."

"What am I talking about? If what Rockvelt heard to-night is true, I shall not be long in New York. That fellow free! Then Satan is apt to be stirred up around these parts. And still, how will he be able to reach America? He will be penniless—almost naked. It is more than likely he will perish in France. All the same, we must be on our guard. It is getting dangerous—infernally dangerous!"

He sauntered to the corner and whistled to the driver of a passing cab, who instantly reined his carriage to the curb.

Speaking a few words to the man, Paul entered the carriage, a ragged urchin standing near, ready to close the door. The Plunger dropped a quarter into the lad's hand, and then the door was made fast.

Away rattled the cab, with the boy clinging fast behind, the silver quarter gripped in his fingers and a grin of delight on his face.

"Talk erbout der fellers w'at lives by deyer wits!" he softly chuckled. "Looker me! Here I've made a whole dollar ter-night, an' I've bin 'tendin' ter me reg'lar biz all der time. Oh, I'm one of der fly kids, or me name hain't Scrimpy Stubbe!"

The detective's assistant was still on the scent.

Scrimpy clung fast till the cab stopped before some fashionable apartment house in the "Tenderloin District."

The boy shadow took good care not to be seen by Prince Paul as the young man left the carriage.

Paul told the driver to wait, ascended the steps with a bound and rung a certain bell.

A feminine voice called down the tube:

"Who is there?"

He replied:

"Paul."

Then there was a click, and the door opened before him. He disappeared beyond it.

Scrimpy took care to ascertain the number over the door, and then he waited for the young Plunger to reappear.

Paul was gone nearly an hour, and his face was flushed when he came out, as the full blaze of the gas-lights revealed. His step was still steady, but he had the appearance of a man who had been drinking freely.

Once more giving an order to the cabman, he entered, closing the door behind himself.

Scrimpy was on hand to swing up behind as the carriage started.

The cab took Paul straight to the home of the Diamond Prince, on Fifth avenue. There cabby was paid and dismissed, and the young Plunger was admitted to the house.

Scrimpy stood on the opposite side of the avenue, thrust his hands deep into his pockets and whistled.

"Well, it looks ter me like me business were up fer der night," he observed. "Der feller's took ter der old jay's nest, an' I don't s'pose he means ter show his nose erg'in ter-night. I'll jest loaf roun' awhile an' see."

He spent an hour watching for Paul to reappear, and, just as the clocks were tolling the midnight hour, he gave over the task.

"Got ter git me nine winks 'for' mornin'," he muttered. "I don't feel good in dis rig, an' I want ter shuck meself out of it. Wonder how I ever endored ter spend so menny years of me

innercent life in dis kind of raiment? It's terrible ter t'ink of!"

He boarded a horse-car and was soon at the office of his employer. He was surprised to see a faint light coming from behind the tightly-drawn curtains.

"Der boss is here," he muttered. "Wonder w'at he's caught onter."

A rap at the door caused the key to turn in the lock, and Scrimpy was admitted by Dan.

"Hello, Scrimps. What luck?"

"Hello, yerself. No great."

"You didn't let him skip you?"

"Nary skip," replied the boy, as he flung himself into a chair, after securing a half-smoked cigar Dan had deposited on the edge of his desk. "W'at d'yer take me fer?"

"The sauciest young rascal in New York. What did you learn?"

Dan resumed his seat.

Scrimpy related his adventures in his own peculiar fashion, and the detective listened attentively. When the boy had finished Dan observed:

"What you have learned is of some importance, my lad. If Paul Prince has fallen into the clutches of Bry Rockvelt, I pity him. Rockvelt is a tad one, and he has a habit of squeezing everything dry he puts his fingers on."

"I have been able to pick up a point or two about the young Plunger. The most interesting is that he is infatuated with a certain woman who calls herself Amy Randolph, but who I believe to be Diamond Bess, a decidedly crooked female."

"It is quite probable that Bry Rockvelt and this woman are in league, their plan being to rob Hanson Prince through the folly of his wayward son. At least, it looks very much that way. In any case, Paul Prince is well in the mire, and it is not going to be an easy task to pull him out."

"But we's der lads w'ot kin do dat little trick," nodded Scrimpy.

"That remains to be seen," came slowly from Dan's lips. "I wish you had been able to overhear what passed between Paul and Rockvelt in the stall at Webber's. From the saloon you followed Prince to the flat where Amy Randolph—otherwise Diamond Bess—has her nest. She will get pinched before I am done with this matter."

CHAPTER VIII.

A CRY FOR HELP.

DAN DOWNING gave Scrimpy instructions to still shadow Prince Paul, as far as possible.

As for himself, the detective had determined to watch Bry Rockvelt. He believed he could soon get a grip on the black-mustached sport, for he knew the man's record was decidedly "shady."

In order to save Paul Prince, he believed it was necessary to get him out from under the influence of the sport and the woman formerly known as Diamond Bess. The moment he got a firm grip on the two, he would put on the "screws."

Shadowing the sport was much easier than he had expected it would be, for Rockvelt did not seem to suspect he was being followed.

Dan spent two days at it, and, much to his disgust, learned nothing more than that Rockvelt was flying here and there all over the city, and having secret interviews with various people who were not of the best society.

The black-mustached gambler seemed worried about something. He met Paul Prince several times during those two days, but Dan was not lucky enough to hear any of the talk that passed between the men.

Scrimpy found an opportunity to report that Paul was also very restless, appearing to be searching for some one or something he could not find. He also said he had several times seen a strange, dark-clothed man, who seemed to be watching the young Plunger.

The night of the second day found Dan Downing in an East Side saloon of the lowest class. He was disguised as a common laborer, and he had followed Rockvelt there. The sport was talking with a chance companion, and Dan was able to overhear nearly all that passed between them.

The detective obtained nothing of interest from that source, for the men were simply talking "horse."

However, before long, another man came rushing hastily into the saloon. He was a stout, square-shouldered fellow, dressed roughly, his entire face being covered with quite a heavy beard.

This man immediately singled out Rockvelt and made a signal to the sport—a signal instantly understood.

Rockvelt left his chance companion at once and followed the new-comer to a corner.

A few words passed between them, and then they both quickly left the saloon for the street.

Dan followed.

He saw the two men hurrying away, and he started in pursuit, taking care not to be detected.

He felt sure something was up.

For three or four blocks he followed the men, and then he saw them enter a cab that seemed to be waiting for them.

An exclamation of disgust broke from the detective's lips.

Was he to be foiled in such a manner?

As the cab rattled away, he ran swiftly forward, almost hopelessly looking for some means of pursuit.

Fortune favored him.

Another cab whirled around the corner, and a neighboring gas-light showed him it was empty. In a moment he hailed the driver.

"Do you see that cab?" he asked, pointing toward the disappearing vehicle.

"Sure, sir."

"Five dollars if you keep it in sight!"

"Tumble in, sir. I'll do it!"

In another moment the pursuit was begun.

But Dan was mistaken in thinking he had not been seen by either Rockvelt or his companion, who was the Easy Jack that Scrimpy had seen at Webber's.

As the detective ran forward, hopeless of finding any means of pursuit, Rockvelt espied him from the cab window.

"Who in blazes is that?" he exclaimed, as Dan passed beneath a street light.

"Who?—where?" asked Easy Jack.

But the carriage whirled away, and Dan was not seen again.

Through the narrow streets of the East Side rattled the two cabs, one in pursuit of the other, yet seeking not to overtake it.

The driver of the first cab seemed to select the darkest streets, and once or twice he looked back over his shoulder, in a suspicious manner.

The second driver attended strictly to business, seeking to keep at a certain distance behind the other.

At length, he drew up.

"They have stopped, sir," he explained, as Dan's head appeared at the door.

The first vehicle had halted before a dark little building, and the two men had descended the steps.

Dan was able to watch them by aid of a light beyond.

The door was opened, and a huge bundle was passed out to them—a bundle that strangely resembled a human form wrapped in clothes.

The two men swiftly bore this bundle down the steps to the cab, into which it was thrust, the men following.

Then the cab whirled away once more.

"Follow," commanded Dan, closing the door.

The order was obeyed, and the chase began again.

But now it happened that the driver of the first cab had "tumbled" to the fact that he was being followed.

Rockvelt had also seen the second vehicle and suspected all was not right.

The sport ordered the driver to give pursuers the slip, and the man at the reins promised to try it.

From the moment of the second start it was an open race, and the detective's cabby seemed holding his own very well.

Dan understood the men in the other carriage had taken the alarm, a thing which he much regretted. He did not exactly know what he could do should his driver keep track of the others till they voluntarily gave over the attempt to elude pursuit, but he trusted his ready wits to suggest something on the spur of the moment.

Looking from the window, the detective realized they were getting into a decidedly tough quarter. The streets were narrow and some of them were crooked.

How would it end?

The question was answered in an abrupt and startling manner.

In turning a corner, they came suddenly upon a long line of truck wagons which had been left in front of some dark and deserted buildings. There happened to be no light at that point to show the driver the wagons till he was right upon them.

The first cab narrowly missed crashing into them, which was a case of good fortune much more than good driving.

Number two was not so fortunate.

One of the cab's wheels struck a wheel of one of the trucks.

A crash followed, the horse was thrown off his feet and the driver pitched headlong from his seat.

Then the cab dropped down on one side in an alarming manner, revealing the fact that a wheel was damaged.

Although thrown upon his knees in the bottom of the carriage and slightly stunned, Dan Downing succeeded in getting out soon enough to catch the frightened horse by the head as it was struggling to its feet.

Uttering language that was far from polite, the driver slowly arose to his feet, really unharmed, save for a few slight bruises.

Two or three men came running up from another street.

To his intense disgust and chagrin, Double-voice Dan saw the other cab whirl beneath the lights at a distant corner and disappear.

The men who had come upon the scene immediately took hold and assisted in removing the harness from the horse and getting the animal upon its feet.

Dan did not wait to discover how much dam-

age had been done. Thrusting a ten dollar bill into the driver's hand, he made all haste in the direction of the corner where he had last seen the carriage containing those he was following.

When the corner was reached, he found the cab was not in sight.

An accident had aided Rockvelt and Easy Jack in evading pursuit.

Of course the detective was greatly worked up over the ill luck that had attended his shadowing attempt, but he kept his feelings suppressed and meditated on the best course to pursue.

His meditations did not terminate in any satisfactory conclusion, and he soon started out in an aimless manner. He wandered on from street to street, paying little attention to the course he was pursuing and having no definite object in view.

He wondered what kind of a trick Rockvelt could have been working. Somehow, he felt fully satisfied the bundle brought from the house and taken into the cab was a human being, and the more he thought it over the more it seemed as if the whole affair was a case of kidnapping.

But who could the unfortunate person be?

That was a question he asked himself in vain.

"Had I discovered and made sure it was really kidnapping," he muttered, "I would have had the very snap on Rockvelt I desire. I could have pulled him up with a round turn, and Paul Prince would have been troubled by him no more. All that would have been left for me to do would have been to get Paul free from the evil power of Rockvelt's woman tool, Diamond Bess."

"Well, it was not my fault. If the driver had not crashed into that truck, Rockvelt would not have given me the slip very easy. We would have been able to keep track of the man. I feel mighty blue over the whole affair."

Dan was not accustomed to being balked, and he did not swallow defeat at all gracefully.

How long he wandered through the wretched quarter he had little idea.

Suddenly he was startled by seeing a cab come around a corner and draw up in front of a wretched old building.

The detective instantly halted and drew back into the shadows, although he scarcely knew why he did so.

The cab door swung open and two men got out. Then a huge bundle was passed out to them.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Dan Downing, starting forward. "Can it be I have unwittingly tumbled on them again?"

The "bundle" was placed in an upright position on the walk, and then it resolved into the figure of a female. The two men grasped an arm on either side and started to force her toward the dark and dilapidated house.

Then the female tried to break from them, and a cry for aid broke from her lips.

"Help! help! Save me!"

The shriek was faint and full of despair. It struck straight to the chivalrous heart of the Go-It-Alone Detective.

"I'm in this little racket my whole weight!" he half-laughed and half-grated, as he bounded forward.

CHAPTER IX.

DAN'S DESPERATE FIGHT.

DAN did not pause to think of the odds. What were two to one to him? A woman was in danger and distress—that was enough for him. Had there been ten, instead of two, he would have dashed to her rescue.

The driver saw the dark figure that came bounding along the shadowy street.

"Ware hawk!" he cried to the two men with the female. "Here comes a bloke!"

Thus warned, the kidnappers were partially prepared for Dan's assault.

Like a hurricane, the detective hurled himself upon them, and the battle began.

"Down him!" snarled Rockvelt, viciously, trying to keep hold of the female and hit Dan at the same time. "Down him lively, before a cop is raised!"

"I'll fix him!" gritted Easy Jack, who was a really formidable antagonist.

But Downing was not an easy man to "fix." He fought like a tiger, and Rockvelt was forced to release the female and go to the assistance of his pal, who was being worsted in the struggle.

The unlucky female on being released staggered to the steps which led up to the dark building, and sunk down helplessly.

As Rockvelt sprang forward to take a hand, Dan managed to hit Easy Jack such a blow that the tough was knocked off his feet.

Up to this moment, Dan had not thought to give the police signal for aid, and he had no time to do so now. Rockvelt came lunging at him, like a tiger.

"You infernal fool!" snarled the sport. "I will teach you better than to dip in my business!"

Then Easy Jack arose, a knife in his hand.

"Git erway!" he raved. "I'll cut his infernal heart out!"

Quick as thought, Dan whirled Rockvelt against the thick-set tough, and Jack was sent staggering away.

The movement saved the detective's life.

Dan now realized how desperate his situation was. He was the match of any two common men, but both his present antagonists were more than common men. It is probable either of them would have easily whipped nine men out of ten, as men run.

Fully understanding his peril, Downing fought like a giant. He astounded his foes.

"He's ther devil hisself!" panted Easy Jack. "Darned if I kin stick him!"

"Look out you don't stick me!" warned the sport. "Have a care with that knife!"

Easy Jack saw there was great danger of cutting his pal instead of their enemy, and so he put the knife up. Then he sought to fasten his powerful hands on Dan.

The ferret knew it would not do to let the two men get a fair hold on him, and he fought to prevent it, sending one after the other reeling away.

With each passing moment the desperadoes became more and more desperate, for they knew Dan might be assisted by some chance passer.

"Now I have him!" triumphantly snarled Rockvelt, as he succeeded in getting a hold upon the ferret's throat.

But he was mistaken.

Dan quickly broke the hold, giving the gambler such a blow on the jaw that he saw scores of stars.

"I am good for you both!" he cried, taking a delight in the unequal struggle. "Fight me fair and square and I will knock you out in the end!"

It began to look as if he spoke the truth.

Easy Jack sought to get at the detective from behind, but Downing was ready for such a move, and he sent the square-built rascal rolling in the gutter.

Then he was forced to turn his attention to Rockvelt once more.

The black-mustached sport had apparently forgotten his fear of creating an alarm, for Dan saw a revolver in his hand.

Rockvelt was about to take a snap shot at the detective!

Like a flash, Dan sprang forward, and, with a deft kick, he sent the weapon flying from the gambler's fingers.

It struck the pavement without being discharged.

For a single instant Rockvelt was dazed, but he quickly closed with the fighting ferret.

"This can't last always!" he grated. "You've got to go under!"

"Right there is where you make your mistake," retorted Dan. "You are the one who goes under; but first you go over."

With that, he gave the man a peculiar flip that lifted him from the ground, and almost flung him squarely over Dan's head.

The sport struck heavily and was stunned.

It was high time that Dan turned his attention to Easy Jack, who had scrambled from the gutter.

The ruffian once more drew his knife, as he made a dash at Downing.

"This time I will fix ye!"

Dan sprang forward to meet the fellow, and Easy Jack's wrist was caught in the powerful grasp of the fighting detective's fingers.

"Not much!" retorted Dan.

He gave the ruffian's wrist a wrench that caused him to drop the knife, which fell ringing on the walk.

Jack struck hard at Downing's face with his free hand, but, by a quick dodge, the blow was avoided.

Then Dan gave the fellow a blow in return, still clinging to Jack's wrist.

Rockvelt's tool fairly fumed with rage and pain.

"Ther devil helps ye!" he raved.

"I do not need assistance from your master," returned Dan, as he struck the fellow again and again, still avoiding the blows Jack dealt in blind fury.

Rockvelt lifted himself on his elbow and stared at the struggling men in a dazed manner, not seeming to comprehend what was occurring.

"Git up here!" panted Easy Jack—"git up an' help me down this critter!"

But the sport did not seem to hear, or, if he heard, he did not seem to understand. The terrible shock of his fall had not passed away.

"You might as well consider him out of it," came from Dan's lips. "I will have you with him in a minute."

"Not much ye won't!"

The tough had learned how dangerous was the man with whom he was dealing, and he fought for time, watching his chance to take the detective off his guard.

On the other hand, Dan had discovered Easy Jack could stand up under an immense amount of punishment. An ordinary man would have been knocked out in short order by the killing blows of the fighting ferret, but Jack still kept his feet.

But the battle could not last forever.

Rockvelt finally struggled to his feet, just as Dan succeeded in sending the square-built ruffian down in a heap. With bull-dog determination the gambler staggered toward the detective, although he was weak as a half-drowned cat.

"The fool doesn't know when he is licked!" thought Dan.

"Curse you!" breathed rather than spoke the sport. "I will show you—"

Dan heard no more.

It seemed as if the skies had suddenly been rent asunder by a thunderbolt and a burst of fire, and he plunged forward on his face, prone at Rockvelt's feet!

The driver of the cab had struck the detective with the heavy butt of his whip, and Dan Downing was knocked senseless.

He was at the mercy of his foes!

With a savage exclamation Bry Rockvelt kicked the fallen man as fiercely as his limited strength would allow.

Easy Jack sought for his knife, growling:

"Let me find it! I'll fix him! I'll do him dead! I'll cut his throat!"

"You fools!" exclaimed the driver. "Look out for the girl! She's tryin' ter sneak!"

It was true that the female who had sunk down on the steps of the house was now trying to get away without being observed. During the fight she had remained like one fascinated, her eyes fixed upon the struggling men. She understood the brave unknown had come to her rescue, and she was praying for his success.

When she saw him knocked senseless, she suddenly realized her peril.

In another instant the dastards would seize upon her again. Could she not get away without them seeing her?

She had waited too long. During the fiercest of the conflict she might have escaped, but now her movement was detected by the driver of the cab, who was plainly a conscienceless scoundrel in league with the kidnappers.

The girl was not strong, and when she attempted to run, she simply tottered along.

Easy Jack was quickly upon her.

"Not so hasty, my pretty!" half-growled, half-laughed Rockvelt's tool. "We need your company a little longer."

"Let go! Help! Save—"

Jack's broad palm closed over her lips and smothered her cries. He lifted her in his arms and bore her back.

Strangely enough, the dark street seemed deserted save by the actors in the little drama. The fight had not attracted any attention. Really, it had lasted but a few moments, although much space has been taken in narrating it.

Rockvelt thrust some money into the hand of the driver, and the cab quickly rattled away.

He then picked up his revolver and Easy Jack's knife.

"Cut ther bloke's throat!" advised Jack.

"I'm not a fool," retorted Rockvelt. "He may be done for anyway. Skip in here lively, before any one happens along and tumbles to us."

He aided Jack in dragging the captive up the steps, and they disappeared within the doorway of the house.

Double-voice Dan was left lying unconscious on the sidewalk. It was well for him that neither of the men really knew who he was. Had they known he was the dreaded Go-It-Alone Detective, Jack's knife would have been pretty sure to have found its way to his heart.

CHAPTER X.

A QUEER COUNT.

DAN DOWNING was aroused by the sound of a voice and the touch of a hand.

"*Mon Dieu!* Eet is a dead man! No, no, no! Hees blood eet do circulate—he do live! He have take too much of ze drink—he is intokicate. Ho! ho! monsieur, thees is no place for you to do ze sleep act. Wake you up! Go home to your wife, let her shaik some of ze dreenk out of you. Come monsieur; ze police zey may find you; zen a fine you will haf pay in ze morn'."

Dan started up, his strength coming back to him with amazing swiftness.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"You take too much of ze dreenk," replied the man, who was bending over him. "You have a vera beeg head in ze mornin'."

"I have not been drinking," retorted the detective, trying to make out the man's looks, but failing on account of the darkness.

"No dreenk? Zen why I find you here, monsieur? Oh, ah! I understan' zese t'ings. I have been trough ze meel, but now I do swear off—I do dreenk no more of ze liquare zat intokicate."

"But I tell you I have not been drinking!" indignantly protested the ferret. "My head—"

"Zat is eet! Ha! ha! Eet do go to your head, eh? I nevaire doubt zat. Eet go to ze legs, too; zen you walk laiike ze spaik break hees back eef he try to foliaire your track. Ha! ha! ha! I find you here—I tink you dead. Now I know you be all right, I weel go on."

"Hold on," requested Dan. "I want to understand this. My head is splitting, and—Great Scott!—it is cut! This sticky stuff on my head must be blood!"

"Zen monsieur must hurt heeself when he fall."

"I tell you in sober earnest I have not been drinking a drop. Do I talk like a man who has been drinking? I don't seem to remember what has happened. Let me see. If my head did not ache so, I could think."

The Frenchman—for such his accent proclaimed him to be—lighted a match and held it close to Dan's head. Then a cry of surprise broke from his lips.

"You do bleed!" he acknowledged. "You have been cut! Ze blood be een your hair. To geet ze cut zere, some person must strike you on ze back of ze head. Have you been rob?"

Dan felt in his pockets, mechanically.

"I think not."

"Zen I do not understan' zis."

The detective looked at his companion, with sudden suspicion.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The man bowed most politely in the darkness.

"I would geeve you my caird," was his answer; "but zere is no light to read ze inscript'. I am ze Count Fabian Mirabeau, of France, monsieur."

"What are you doing here?"

"Going to my apartments, monsieur."

"Going to your apartments in this quarter! Well, this is a strange section for a count to stop in!"

"Meesfortune, sir, sometime reduce a man. I learn ze game of pokaire in zis country, but I do play wiz ze sharps. Zey take my skeen, monsieur. So I have to wait for ze remeetance from France. I am a man of honaire, and I do not like to ask for so much as ze leetle loan."

This explanation hardly satisfied the detective, but he allowed it to pass, while he tried to collect his thoughts. At length he asked:

"How did you happen to find me here?"

"I was walk along ze street, I see ze carriage go away. Zen I see somebody go in ze house zere, and I come near fall ovaire you as I pass, monsieur."

Dan looked around.

"Some of my many enemies must have made an attempt on my life," he muttered.

"You have ze enemies, monsieur?"

"Well, slightly."

"I have ze saime—one, two, vera bad."

"You could not count mine on your fingers, even though you had several extra pairs of hands."

"What is your business, eef I may ask?"

"I am afraid I shall have to decline telling you, count, till I know a little more of your pedigree."

"Ze pedigree? I do not understand what zat is, morsieur. I don't sink I have eet wiz me."

At any other time this reply would have been amusing to Dan, but it did not prove so now.

"You say you saw a carriage move from this spot, count?"

"Oui."

"Let me think," and Dan placed his hand to his forehead. "I am almost able to remember. It will all come to me soon. If my head would only stop aching."

Once more the Frenchman lighted a match, asking to look at the wound again.

"Eet is not vera bad," he announced. "You weel be all right vera soon."

"That is comforting information."

"Eet should be so to—*Mon Dieu!*"

The exclamation burst from the count's lips, as he made the discovery that Dan's beard was false. The beard had become partially detached in the struggle.

"You are een disguise, monsieur! Zen you must be a criminal or a detective."

"I am not a criminal."

"Zen you are a detective? *Oui, oui, oui!* I see zat is ze trutel! I have ask about ze detective in New York. I wondaire eef you know heem?"

"Who is be?"

"One wondaireful man—like Monsieur Vidocq—oh, wondaireful! Hees name ees Daniel Downing, but he is sometime call Double-ze-voice Dan. You know heem, eh?"

"I have heard of him," answered Dan, dryly, his suspicions being increased.

"I shall see heem ze morrow," declared the count. "I hev beesness with heem."

"Business?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Important?"

"Vera."

"I may be able to take you to him to-night."

"Oh, monsieur! eet weel be great troubaile!"

"Not at all."

"Zen I do make eet right when I geet my mona from France."

"Don't speak of it."

Dan now arose to his feet, being assisted by the count; but the detective found himself very weak and limp. He attempted to walk, but would have fallen but for the support of the Frenchman.

"It is strange," he muttered. "I felt all right. I suppose I will be strong enough soon, but my head seems swimming round and round."

He clasped his hands to his head and stood still. Suddenly he gave a start.

"Ha!—I remember!"

His mind was growing clearer, and he re-

collected he had been shadowing Bry Rockvelt. Then, little by little, he recalled all that had happened up to the time he was struck on the head by the driver's whip.

"The devils!" he grated. "They were not a match for me, though there were two of them! I was struck from behind!"

"Zat is plain by ze wound," said the count.

"I wonder why they did not finish me?" fell from Dan's lips. "It must be because they did not recognize me. I am fortunate to be alive."

He was surely fortunate.

Suddenly, he caught Count Mirabeau by the arm, his full strength seeming to return in an instant.

"What did you tell me?" he demanded.

"You saw a cab drive away?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"And men entering this house?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Look here, count, something tells me you are an honest man."

"Tanks, monsieur; I do claim to be zat," bowed Mirabeau, his hand on his heart.

"Those men were villains!" the detective added. "They were abducting a female. I saw them take her from the cab, and when she cried for help, I attacked them both."

"A vera brave ac'," declared the Frenchman.

"I would have whipped them, had I not been struck down from behind by a third person. Now, those men carried that female into this house."

"Eet do look zat way."

"Count, I am going to trust you."

"Vera good, monsieur."

"I am Dan Downing."

"You—ze detective?"

"Yes."

"Ze vera man I want to see!"

"I am going to try to find out what has become of that girl, if possible. I mean to learn something about this house. To do so, I shall go in there, if necessary. Will you do me a favor?"

"Wiz ze great pleazare, monsieur."

"Then remain here and watch for me to come out. If I do not return within an hour, you may know something serious has happened to me. Take the number of the house, and the name of the street, and report to the police. Can I depend on you to do that?"

"Monsieur, I would rozaire go een ze house wiz you."

"No?"

"*Oui.*"

"I think you do not understand the peril. This house is probably a nest of criminals. It might be like going into a hornets' nest."

"You are not afraid to go zere. Count Fabian Mirabeau do not fear anyt'ing any othaire dare face. It would be one honaire—one great honaire—to face peril wiz Double-ze-voice Dan."

"Well, you are the queerest Frenchman I ever met! If you go in there with me, you may walk out a dead man. Take that into consideration. We may have to fight."

"Monsieur, I really do enjoy ze good fight when I was a yeungaire man, and I do tink I like eet some now. Lead ze way, monsieur; I weel foliaire."

"Are you armed?"

"To ze teeth."

"All right; come on."

Dan ascended the steps, with the count at his heels.

CHAPTER XI.

LIKE A BATTERING-RAM.

To the surprise of both men, the door was not locked or fastened in any way. Dan pushed it open, and they entered the lower hall.

There they hesitated.

How were they to find the ones for whom they sought?

The question troubled them, but the detective was not inclined to lose a great deal of time thinking it over. He moved ahead and tried the first door his hand fell on.

It opened before his touch, and he looked into a wretched room, where some bleary-eyed men and women were sitting around a crazy table, on which stood a broken pitcher of foam-covered beer. Some ragged and dirty children played and quarreled on the floor. The light of a smoking lamp illuminated the hovel-like apartment.

The men and women looked at the detective and his companion in a listless, indifferent way, and the children stopped quarreling for a moment.

Dan closed the door.

"We need not look for them there," he said. "Come on."

They looked into room after room, knocking at the doors till they aroused some one, if they could gain admittance no other way. Once or twice they came near having trouble with some of the more belligerent occupants of the house, but Dan pretended to be looking for a certain "John Smith," and they were able to avoid a battle through this subterfuge.

Dan noticed the front windows of the house were all heavily curtained with some kind of

material, and this explained why the place had looked so dark and deserted from the street. Some of the curtains were clothing of the most wretched sort, but they served the purpose for which they were intended.

"I fancy this is a den of the very worst character," he softly explained to the count. "I have recognized several hard cases here."

"Zey had bettaire not troubaile us," returned the count. "We will make eet hort for zem eef zey do."

At length, they reached the top floor and came to the last door to try. It was standing slightly open and, peering in, they saw a man poring over a ponderous book that was spread upon a table. A shaded lamp was at the man's elbow.

It seemed as if the occupant of the room heard them approach his door, for he immediately arose, removing some spectacles from his eyes and standing in an attitude of expectancy.

He was a man past middle age, his face being covered by an iron-gray beard. His build was rather slight, and there was very little flesh on his bones. He had the appearance of a man slowly wasting away with some secret and unfathomable disease.

Dan involuntarily paused in the darkness of the passage, being able to see the old man through the partially open doorway. At once the unknown called out:

"Come in, gentlemen—come in. I have been expecting you."

Both the detective and the count were startled. He had been expecting them! What did that mean?

"Diable!" whispered the Frenchman.

"He must be a wizard!" muttered Dan.

"He do look like zat," declared Mirabeau.

"Let's go in."

The ferret pushed open the door and boldly entered, Count Mirabeau at his heels.

The old man made a grave obeisance.

"Be seated, gentlemen," he said, motioning toward the two chairs which the room contained. "You have come at last. Why have you been so long? You should know I am a man who dislikes delays, and the case is most serious. When a human life hangs in the balance, it is the duty of those who follow our exalted profession to respond without loss of time."

The detective and the count exchanged glances. What could the strange man mean?

"I think you have made a mistake, sir," said Dan. "You evidently take us for some one else."

"Oh, not at all—not at all. I know you, gentlemen; we have met many times while attending to our professional duties."

"I am certain this is the first I have heard of it."

The strange man smiled. It was a sad and almost ghastly smile.

"This is scarcely a time for jesting," he said, suddenly becoming grave again. "I presume you understand the full particulars of the case?"

"I am afraid I do not."

The old man looked annoyed.

"I was very particular to make them plain in my letter," he declared.

"But I never received the letter."

"Then how came you here?"

"Quite by accident, I assure you."

The graybeard shook his head, seeming quite at a loss to comprehend something—just what that something was no one but himself knew.

The detective and Count Mirabeau regarded the stranger with increasing interest. There was a mysterious air about him that fascinated them.

The little room was bare and poorly furnished, the walls never having been papered, although they were rudely plastered. But the plastering was falling off in places, and there was a general air of decay about the entire place.

Besides the big book upon the table, which the man had been perusing just before they entered, there were several others, all having the appearance of being well worn. At one side of the room were a few shelves, which supported other books and some papers.

In a corner were several strange-looking dishes and implements of various molds. At a glance, Dan saw these things were probably used for chemical experiments.

The old man had the air of one who had been a great student, and the detective saw he was not like the other occupants of the house.

Count Mirabeau had also been observing the old man closely, and he now covertly whispered in the detective's ear:

"Ze man be mad! Look een hees eye—see how eet do burn! He ees mad, monsieur!"

The ferret instantly saw his companion was right; without a doubt, the strange occupant of the room was a deranged person.

For some moments the graybeard shook his head, looking at his two visitors in a manner that was plaintively reproachful, as he apparently thought them guilty of tampering with him.

"It is not right," he muttered. "But, then, never mind—let it pass. We must unite in our attempt to save his life. It is a most serious case, I assure you, gentlemen, and will be worthy of our united skill."

"What is this case you speak of?"

"How can you ask, doctor?"

Dan saw the old fellow took him for a physician.

"I wish to hear it from your lips," he replied, taking a sudden fancy to humor the man, though he knew not why.

"It has given me great trouble, as it is one of the most complicated cases ever fallen beneath my attention. The man's heart has literally ceased its regular action, only working naturally once an hour. For nearly sixty minutes it will remain dormant, and yet the man lives. It is almost beyond belief, but I assure you it is true."

"A strange case, certainly."

"Vera strange," agreed the count, falling into Dan's humor. "Zis have great interest to me."

The old man seemed highly pleased.

"You may be sure I would not have troubled two physicians of such world-wide reputations as Doctors Paxton and De Grau, had I not felt sure the case would have been of sufficient interest to fully repay them for whatever trouble they might incur. Will you not be seated, gentlemen?"

But neither man fancied putting themselves in the power of the deranged.

"I trust you will excuse us," pleaded Dan. "We do not care to sit, Doctor—er—I seem to have forgotten your name."

Again the sad smile flitted for a moment across the old man's face.

"That is little to be wondered at," he confessed. "I have not made the enviable reputation I might had I been less given to experiments; but I assure you, sirs, my experiments have all been strictly in the interest of humanity. I have sacrificed myself and my desire for fame that I might delve into the mysteries of science and solve the problems which have confronted our brotherhood for ages."

"Which was truly noble of you, doctor,"

The old man bowed profoundly.

"Hearing you utter those words, Doctor Paxton, assures me I have not lived in vain, even though I die unknown."

"But you have not told us your name."

"My name is Strange—Edward Strange."

Both the detective and the count thought the name well-fitted to the man.

"That is not a name I should forget," acknowledged Dan. "I will try and remember it in the future. You may not remain unknown to fame, doctor."

A hectic flush tinged the shrunken cheeks for a moment and the dark eyes glowed. Though age was on him, youth past forever and reason tottering on its throne, the man was imbued with one great ambition—he was pursuing a lofty purpose, chimerical though it really was.

"Doctor Paxton," he retorted, his voice trembling a trifle with the emotion that fell upon him, "you have given me greater pleasure than I had reasonable hope to expect. I thank you, sir—I thank you."

Dan had been studying the man closely, having a lurking suspicion that he might be playing a part, but this suspicion gradually faded. There was no doubt but he was what he seemed—a lunatic. Without doubt, he was harmless, but it is not advisable to trust oneself in the power of the most harmless madman.

"Where is this singular subject?" asked the detective.

"He is not here yet," replied Dr. Strange.

"They have not brought him in."

"Then you have him brought here?"

"Every night."

"At what time?"

"Shortly after I retire."

"That is a trifle odd."

"I thought it might seem so, but I believe I can show you my reasons."

"Do so."

"They are simple. I work and study through the day and need rest when it comes night. My brain is tired—it becomes very tired with my studies. I am not as young as I once was, but when I perfect my great elixir, I shall renew my youth. I have almost reached success, and, if I am spared a few years longer, I am certain of attaining it."

"The first night they brought him here it was without my consent or knowledge, and I was angry when I awoke and found him in the room. However, my anger soon vanished when I saw how strange the case was, and I studied it attentively. They have brought him every night since then, and I have hopes of saving his life."

"Now, gentlemen, if you will—"

From beyond the thin partition of lathes and plaster came a feminine shriek—a cry for help!

Dr. Strange seemed astounded.

"Gods!" he gasped. "That was her voice—her voice!"

"It is the voice of the kidnapped girl!" exclaimed Dan Downing. "She is in a room beyond this partition! Where is the door that leads to it?"

"There is no door," replied Strange. "That room is entered from another part of the house."

Again came the appeal for help.

With a hoarse shout, Double-voice Dan hurled himself like a battering-ram against the partition. There was a crash of breaking lathes and

rattle of falling plaster, and then the fearless detective plunged through the flimsy partition into the room beyond!

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER STRUGGLE.

COUNT FABIAN MIRABEAU was certainly no coward, and he did not hesitate about following the daring detective.

It was well for Dan the count did so.

The falling plastering filled the ferret's eyes with dust, and he was blinded when he burst into the room from which the appealing cries had come.

There was a chorus of fierce exclamations, and then a dark figure leaped toward the detective, something bright flashing in one hand.

"Hold on zere!" cried the Frenchman, as he caught the man's shoulder and sent him whirling aside. "I believe I will take a hand in zis bees-ness!"

In the room were two other men, an old hag-like woman and a young girl, who was beautiful, though deathly pale. The girl was held by the claw-like hands of the old woman, who seemed wonderfully strong, for the unfortunate captive was struggling fiercely for liberty.

"Help!" cried the girl, again. "Save me, gentlemen—save me!"

"Hush her infernal squalls!" snarled Bry Rockvelt, who was one of the men.

"Then ketch holt here an' help me," retorted the old hag. "She fights like a hussy!"

Rockvelt quickly obeyed, and the girl was being dragged from the room.

"Hold on zere!" rung out the voice of Count Mirabeau, as a revolver appeared in his hand.

"I am one excellaunt shot, and I t'ink I try zis peestol eef you don't let zat young lady go."

But Rockvelt quickly held the girl in front of him, still continuing to retreat backward toward the door.

"Don't shoot, sir—don't shoot!" cried the voice of Dr. Strange, who had entered the room through the breach in the wall. "You will kill her!"

The deranged man gave the count's arm a jerk, and the revolver was accidentally discharged.

A wild shriek broke from the lips of the beautiful unknown, and she sunk limp and nerveless in Rockvelt's arms.

"You devil!" harshly screamed Dr. Strange, as he grappled with the Frenchman. "You have killed her! Your life shall atone for the deed!"

The count was a man of unusual suppleness and strength, but it did not take him long to discover he was no match for the infuriated madman. Strange pressed him back, and the maniac physician's eyes glowed with a horrible light that revealed his intent to really slay the man he had seized.

Having cleared the dust from his eyes, Double-voice Dan attempted to follow the kidnappers into the adjoining room.

But Easy Jack, who had been prevented from assaulting Dan by the count, had recovered himself, and he attacked the detective once more.

The ferret had not re-adjusted his false beard after it was partially torn from his face in the street encounter. Instead of re-arranging it, he had removed it entirely, and his disguise was simply the laborer's clothes he wore.

Easy Jack recognized him.

"Curse you, Double-voice Dan!" snarled the ruffian. "Will nothin' down ye fer keeps?"

They grappled, but Jack, stout and stocky though he was, proved no match for the infuriated detective. Dan sent the fellow reeling backward.

Then it was that Jack's beard was torn from his face, and Dan saw the tough had also been in disguise.

A cry of amazement broke from the ventriloquist ferret's lips.

He recognized his enemy.

It was Battery Ben!

The famous crook had not perished in the waters of the East River. Scrimpy had been right in saying Dan would hear from Ben again.

Of course the detective was astounded, but he scarcely gave the discovery more than a second thought. He had no time for that then, as he understood the unfortunate girl was being dragged away by her evil captors. Once more he started to follow them, having completely forgotten Count Mirabeau.

With a grated imprecation, Battery Ben caught up an oil lamp and flung it at the head of the ferret.

Dan barely dodged the missile.

The lamp struck with a crash in a corner, and the briefest instant of darkness was followed by a burst of flame.

The lamp had been dashed in pieces, and the oil was afire.

With a cry of defiance, the Battery Bird sprang through the doorway and disappeared.

It was fairly appalling with what suddenness the flames sprung up.

In the light of the fire Dan saw Count Mirabeau and the maniac fighting desperately,

and he perceived the Frenchman was getting the worst of it.

With his eyes gleaming like those of a fiend, Dr. Strange was forcing the count back toward the flames. The Frenchman was struggling grittily, but his opponent seemed possessed of the strength of a Samson.

"Into the fire—into hell!" shrieked the maniac, his reason having entirely deserted him. "It is the place for all devils! See the fire—see it dance! Ha! ha! ha! You killed her! You shall burn!"

The detective suddenly understood the horrible peril of his new friend, and he sprang to Mirabeau's assistance.

None too soon.

In another moment both the maniac doctor and the count would have fallen into the rising fire.

Dan grasped Strange by the throat and tore the two men apart.

A horrible shriek of baffled rage broke from the man's throat, and he promptly turned his attention toward the ferret.

"His life is mine!" he yelled. "You would rob me of him! He killed her!—I saw him do it!"

The fire was spreading in an appalling manner, and the detective saw there was danger of perishing in the flames. He could not afford to imperil his own life in dealing gently with the man, even though he was crazed.

Out plunged Dan's good right fist and Dr. Strange was knocked down in an instant. He was not stunned, for he immediately attempted to arise.

Dan waited to see no more.

"Come, count!" he cried. "We must follow those devils! This is a death trap!"

"I am wiz you, monsieur," assured the strange Frenchman.

They hurled themselves against the door beyond which the kidnappers had vanished with their victim, and it flew open before the assault.

As they rushed into the adjoining room, they were met by several people who entered it from another direction.

"What's the matter?" was the question.

"Fire!" replied Dan. "The place has been fired by the men who left here a moment ago. Send in an alarm quickly!"

There was certainly need enough of sending in an alarm, for the flames suddenly burst forth as if in pursuit of the detective and the count.

"Fire, fire, fire!"

The wild cry rung through the old building, arousing the inmates to a sense of their danger.

"Wheech way deed zem dev-vals go?" demanded the count. "Zey sets ze fire! Where be zey?"

Some one declared the men and the old woman had gone toward the roof.

"And the girl?" cried Dan. "Did they have a girl with them—a captive?"

No one answered the question.

"To ze roof!" shouted the Frenchman.

They were hindered by the mad rush of the people who were hurrying to get out of the building before the fire shut them off. It was amazing the number of human beings that came swarming from the rooms. The place was a perfect beehive.

The detective and his companion fought their way against the tide of humanity and finally reached the ladder that led to the roof.

The skylight was standing open.

Dan ascended the ladder almost at a bound, and the moment after he thrust his head above the level of the roof, he called back to the count: "They are here!"

He had caught sight of some dark figures outlined against a distant patch of clear sky, where the clouds had parted for a moment.

At the sound of Dan's voice, a curse came floating across the roof, and a figure darted toward the skylight.

"Will nothin' kill ye, you infernal hound?" grated the voice of Battery Ben.

The detective was not to be caught in such a manner, and he was quickly on the roof, prepared to meet his foe. They came together violently, the Battery Bird plainly expecting to take Dan by surprise.

The ferret had barely time to discover the others were trying to make their way to an adjoining building in some manner, and he called to the count:

"Take at them devils there, while I do up this whelp! They are trying to skip us!"

"I weel give zem my vera close attention," assured the queer Frenchman, half-laughingly, as he darted across the roof.

Thus another struggle was inaugurated.

It was a night of fierce battles.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MAGNIFICENT LEAP.

ROCKVELT and his companions were trying to escape from the roof by means of a rope-ladder.

The count did not pause to wonder why they had taken to the roof at all, instead of hurrying down and out into the street. Had there been plenty of time, he might have discovered they were not attempting to reach the ground, but

were trying to swing the ladder in at the open window of an adjoining building. A rascally-looking man had leaned out of the window and attempted to catch it, but failed.

The black-mustached sport gave a cry of rage as he saw Count Mirabeau come bounding across the roof.

"Look out!" he warned, as he sprang up.

His companions, a man and the bag-like woman, were clinging fast to the girl captive, who struggled with all her strength. A muffling cloth about her head prevented her from uttering cries that could be heard more than a short distance away.

Rockvelt drew a revolver.

"I'll shoot the cursed fool!" he snarled.

Crack! The weapon spoke the instant it reached a level.

The Frenchman did not fall. He had seen the motion of the gambler's hand and divined his danger. Almost on the instant that Rockvelt's finger pressed the trigger, the count "ducked" his head and lowered his body.

The bullet whistled harmlessly over his head.

In another moment he had grasped the deadly weapon, and a fierce struggle for possession began.

"Zat is bad t'ing for you to fool wiz, monsieur," came from the mustache-shaded lips of the Frenchman. "You weel shoot somebody ze first t'ing you know, so you bettaire let me have ze toy."

"Who in blazes are you?" hoarsely demanded Rockvelt, as he tried to wrench the revolver free.

"Perhap, you find me ze enemy of you, monsieur," was the reply.

"You are in with that cursed detective!"

"Wiz Double-ze-voice Dan?"

"Yes."

"He is one vera great man; I do like beem. He make eet vera oncomfortable for ze doer of ze crook work."

"Your race will be mighty short, if you run in harness with him."

"Do you t'ink so, Monsieur Danglar?"

Rockvelt gave a gurgling exclamation of amazement and dismay.

"Danglar! You devil! why do you call me that?"

"By zat you be known in Paree—Monsieur Leon Danglar."

"It is a lie!"

But the very manner in which the gambler uttered the words revealed that the count had spoken the truth.

"Oh, no, no, no!" came triumphantly from the Frenchman's lips—"zat is no lie! Zat is ze trute—ze whole trute. I know you in Paree—oui, oui, oui! I am not to be fool!"

"Who are you?" Rockvelt again demanded.

For some reason, the sport's strength had apparently deserted him, and, had Count Mirabeau been so inclined, he could have sent Bry Rockvelt reeling from the roof.

"Zat I let you guess."

"You must be one of those infernal French detectives!"

"You t'ink zat?"

"Curse you—yes!"

"Well, I don't care a leetle."

Suddenly the count tripped the gambler, at the same time wrenching the revolver from Rockvelt's hand. The man struck heavily when he fell and seemed dazed for an instant.

"Lay zere while I attend to zese othaires," exclaimed the count, as he sprang toward the man and woman, who still clutched the girl captive.

Meantime, Double-voice Dan and Battery Ben had been engaged in a savage encounter. The crook had tried to haul the detective down through the skylight, but Dan was not to be downed in such a manner.

"No you don't, Ben!" came from his lips. "I know your games, my boy. You are very, very tricky; but you can't play rats on me."

"I'll kill ye 'fore I'm done with yer!" growled the Battery Bird.

"Bet you two to one you don't."

But Ben was not laying any wager just then. Instead of spending his breath in talk, he settled down with savage earnestness in the attempt to get the best of Dan Downing.

Never before had the detective met a single man who proved so nearly his match. The crook was nerved by desperation, and he exerted every ounce of energy in his muscular body.

The two men sawed and panted, neither seeming to gain an advantage for some time. Finally, however, Dan obtained a hold on his foe that placed Ben at a disadvantage.

"You've got to fall, Ben," he said.

"Ef I do, you go with me!" was the savage retort.

They were close to the edge of the roof at the front side of the building, and, suddenly from below them came a burst of light.

Flames had flashed out at a window!

A crowd had swiftly collected in the street, and the light of the fire showed them the struggling men on the edge of the roof.

A great shout went up.

Then a fire-patrol wagon came rattling down the street, quickly followed by an engine, drawn by a magnificent pair of white horses.

Still the men on the roof fought on.

Battery Ben seemed suddenly deranged, for he was plainly trying to leap from the roof and drag Dan with him.

"You fool!" grated the detective. "Do you want to kill yourself?"

"If I can finish you at ther same time, I don't keer," replied the ruffian, who seemed imbued with a fiendish malignity toward the ferret.

Dan was now forced to fight more desperately than before, for it was not an easy thing to prevent the crook from accomplishing his horrible purpose.

Getting Ben by the throat, Dan finally choked him so he was able to fling him down.

Then the fighting ferret turned toward the others.

The light of the flames plainly revealed them to him, for the fire had secured a great headway on the dry and tinder-like wood of the building. Smoke was pouring from the skylight, and it seemed the flames would soon leap through.

Dan saw the girl was in the clutch of the old woman. Count Mirabeau was fighting the third man, while Rockvelt had struggled to his feet and was standing like one stunned.

As Dan started toward the two females, the gambler blocked his path.

"No you don't!" snarled Rockvelt, brushing a hand across his eyes. "Up and at him, Ben!"

"Out of the way, you fool!" grated Dan.

"What do you want—to stay here and burn? This is a detached building, and our escape from this roof is cut off anyway."

"If you'd remained away two minutes longer, we'd been off the roof," flung back the gambler. "As it is—"

"We're apt to all be roasted together!"

"Just so."

"I have no idea of staying here to roast."

The detective made a spring and was on Rockvelt. He struck out straight from the shoulder, and the sport was able to only partially avoid the blow. It did not knock him down, as it had been intended to do, but sent him whirling aside.

In another moment, Dan would have torn the girl from the grasp of the old woman, but just then he was seized from behind, a pair of muscular arms being flung about his body.

Battery Ben was up again!

And all the while the flames were rising!

It began to look as if the people on the roof were doomed, unless the firemen came promptly to their rescue.

Dan made desperate attempts to break the hold of the Battery Bird, but the crook had apparently put all the energy of his being into the clutch.

Slowly and surely he forced the detective toward the edge of the roof!

"Ha! ha!" was the savage laugh that sounded in Dan's ears. "I have you now, you cuss! This time I will do ye! You'll never trouble us any more!"

It seemed as if the desperado spoke the truth.

"Chuck him over!" cried Rockvelt, fiercely.

"Let him take the little drop!"

The gambler had been sadly used in the struggles through which he had passed, and he seemed too dazed to render Ben any assistance.

Once more a great shout went up from the street, as they saw the battling men again approach the edge of the roof. They understood a fight for life was taking place on the top of the burning building, and it now seemed as if the struggle would have a swift and tragic termination.

But Dan Downing had no thought of meeting death in such a manner. He saw the firemen running up their ladders and heard the cries from below, but not for a single instant did he lose his nerve. With one vast and mighty outlay of strength, he broke his enemy's hold.

At the same instant, Count Mirabeau took a hand, having temporarily disposed of his other combatant.

"Oh, zis is ze vera great excite!" coolly observed the odd fellow, catching hold of Dan, who was tottering on the verge. "Zis is ze great pleasaure to participate een! Oui! I have not so good a fight for long time."

Dan had no time to think what a strange person he had so accidentally fallen in with, but he was momentarily grateful the Frenchman had proved a friend instead of an enemy. No man could battle at the side of Double-voice Dan in such a manner without earning the highest regard of the fearless ferret, and, when the opportunity came—if it ever did—Dan was sure to repay the debt.

Rockvelt had hastened to the assistance of the old woman, from whom the girl had not been able to escape, and once more they were trying to get from the roof into the window of the neighboring building.

But they were not successful.

Suddenly, from the windows beneath them, flame and smoke burst forth, curling up over the roof, and driving them back from the sudden fierce heat.

"Great God!" gasped the sport, his face blenching, and still seeming ruddy in the fitful glow of the fire. "We're lost!"

He suddenly released his hold on the girl, having at last realized the desperate danger in

which they were. As soon as a sense of it all fell full upon him, his only thought was of self-preservation. No matter what became of the others, he must find a way to save his own worthless life.

The old hag now understood the peril, and she also released the girl, who tottered aside a few steps, and sunk down weakly, her strength seeming gone.

As Rockvelt wheeled from the fire, the old woman caught him tenaciously by the arm, shrilly screaming:

"You must save me! I can't git down from here alone! You must help me!"

He tried to tear himself away, but her bony fingers held fast to his sleeve.

"If you leave me here ter die, I'll haunt ye!" she raved, her face looking most horrible in the flaring light of the fire. "I'll haunt ye ter yer grave!"

For reply to this, Rockvelt lifted his clinched hand and smote her fairly in the face, felling her to the roof, where she lay in a dazed and helpless condition.

The people in the street tried to shout their encouragement to the imperiled ones above, but not a word was understood by anybody on the roof. True they heard the roar of voices, but there was such a mingling of cries that it was not possible for them to understand any particular directions.

Battery Ben seemed to realize at last that death was right upon them all, for he made no further attempt to attack the detective.

But neither Dan or the count had given up hope. Dan had noticed, at one side, a roof that was three feet below the one they were on; but the space between the two buildings was appalling when contemplated under such circumstances.

Suddenly the detective seemed to form a resolution. Two cat-like bounds took him to the side of the kidnapped girl, and he caught her up in his strong arms.

"Follow me, count!" he shouted. "It's for life!"

Then he ran swiftly across the roof, holding the girl in his arms. A burst of fire came from below, and a blast of hot air smote him in the face as he reached the verge, but he was not checked in the least. Gathering all his energy for the almost superhuman task, he shot outward and upward, sailing like a bird over the red billow of fire that sent out forked fingers of flame to clutch at him, seeming enraged at being thus baffled and deprived of the prey already almost within its grasp.

A great roaring shout went up from the throats of the spectators who witnessed the magnificent leap.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO DISAPPEARANCES.

It seemed impossible that a human being burdened with the weight of another could spring across the space between the two roofs.

Count Mirabeau had cried out in amazement and alarm when he saw the desperate course the detective had determined upon, but Dan had not heeded that cry, if he even heard it.

The count paused in horror, expecting to see the daring detective and the unknown girl go plunging down to death between the two buildings.

But Dan Downing had not overestimated his abilities. Across the space he sailed, his feet striking on the very edge of the other roof.

Had he made the leap alone and struck in such a position, he would most surely have fallen backward and met his death on the ground below; but the weight of the girl in his arms seemed to fling him forward on his face, and both fell prostrate on the roof—saved!

Before Dan could arise, the Frenchman had followed, and being unincumbered, made the leap successfully, alighting at the detective's side.

"Wondaireful, wondaireful!" he cried, as he assisted Dan and the girl to arise. "I nevaire see ze equaile of zat—nevaire! I t'ink you do go down to ze death, but you make ze jump just like ze bird zat fly. Oh, eet is wondaireful!"

But Dan scarcely heeded the man's words at all. He had turned his attention to the girl.

"Are you injured?" he asked.

She tried to reply, but at first she was too frightened to utter a sound. At length, however, she succeeded in assuring him she was not harmed at all.

And just then another figure came sailing through the cloud of smoke and alighted on the roof.

It was Battery Ben!

The famous crook had successfully made the jump for life.

He was swiftly followed by Rockvelt and the third desperado, the old woman being left to her fate.

The Battery Bird was the first to recover after the leap, and he immediately attacked Dan again, his vindictive nature not yet being subdued.

Count Mirabeau promptly took a hand. Catching Ben by the collar, he sent the crook reeling aside, at the same time hissing to Dan:

"Git away wiz ze girl—down ze skylight! I will make it so lively for zese gentlemen zat zey weel not follaire you. Go!"

Only for one instant did the detective hesitate, for he quickly understood the Frenchman's active brain had devised the best course to pursue.

Catching up the girl, the ferret hastened to the skylight, and his heavy laborer's boots crashed through the glass, carrying away sash and all.

It is little wonder the girl was almost helpless with fear and Dan was obliged to carry her down the steps, which, very fortunately, he found already beneath the broken window.

As he descended, he looked back and saw the count was having his hands full to keep the three men at bay, but was holding them back in a noble manner.

"That man is pure gold all the way through!" thought the Go-It-Alone Detective. "He is a man to tie to and swear by!"

He found there was much excitement in the house, people being on the move, and his entrance was scarcely noticed. As he went down, he heard some firemen dragging a hose-pipe up the stairs below him, their intention probably being to turn a stream on the adjoining house as soon as they reached the roof.

But Dan's heart misgave him when he thought of the dauntless Frenchman left on the roof to fight three foes.

"He cannot keep them off long!" was his thought. "They will down him! I must go back."

He found the door of a room standing wide open, and he carried the girl in there.

"Will you remain here till I return?" he asked. "Remember I am your friend."

She clung to him.

"Don't leave me sir!" pleaded her soft and musical voice, and by the light of a gas-jet he saw the face of this unknown unfortunate was decidedly beautiful, though pale from terror.

"I must," he said, firmly. "But you will be unharmed here."

"Those horrible men—"

"I am going back to them, and I will take care they do not come here. They shall not touch you again, young lady."

This reassured her somewhat.

"Why must you go back there?"

"My friend is there with three foes to battle against. I must aid him. If you remain quietly here, I will return to you in a very few minutes. Do not stir from this spot. Promise me you will not."

She promised.

Dan was barely able to get ahead of the firemen in climbing to the roof. The moment he thrust his head through the skylight, the light of the burning building showed him the form of Count Mirabeau close at hand, still standing off the crooks.

Dan leaped out upon the roof, just as a blow from Battery Ben's hard fist sent the count staggering backward. The detective caught the form of his friend, crying:

"Get a brace on, mate! I'm here at your back!"

"It is high time, monsieur," panted the Frenchman. "Zem dev-vals zey do give me vera great fight. Zey be almost too mana for me."

Dan said nothing more just then, but his quick brain was filled with wonder at the ability of this strange man to hold the trio back so long, for he well understood how desperate the crooks had become.

The firemen were close at Dan's heels, and Rockvelt seemed to understand the game was lost, for he did not seek to renew the battle.

Not so Battery Ben.

The famous crook was filled with unutterable fury by the reappearance of Downing.

"You cursed bloodhound!" he snarled, springing for the detective.

Dan whirled Count Mirabeau aside and met the rush of the Battery Bird.

"You need to have your tail twisted, Benny," he observed, as he parried the blows made at his head. "You slipped me once, but I believe I will take you in out of the wet this time."

"You'll never pull me!" was the savage retort.

"Don't be so sure of that, my hearty. I have judged better men than you."

Up through the skylight came the firemen, dragging the hose. It happened that the two men were in their way, and the result was that Dan and Ben were parted by the brawny fellows.

"Get down to hard ground and fight it out there!" advised one of the fire-fighters. "This hain't no place for a scrap."

With a surge of his left arm, the speaker sent Battery Ben staggering backward, and, a moment later, the crook fell crashing through the skylight, disappearing instantly.

"Come, count," said Dan. "We will follow, and I reckon we'll find our belligerent friend in a heap down below."

"Ze fall must have keel him," declared Mirabeau.

Dan fully expected to find Battery Ben in an unconscious heap below the roof-opening, and

great was his disappointment and surprise to discover the crook had vanished.

"Where in the world can he have gone?" asked the bewildered detective.

"He have vera hard head," observed the count. "I do punch eet mana time, but he nevaire mind a great bit. Now he take ze tumble, and do ze vanish act. He do git ze best of me, and zat I confess."

In vain they looked for the Battery Bird. It soon became evident the crook had not been injured by the fall, and had immediately betaken himself from that immediate locality.

"It seems that he has escaped me again," muttered Downing, regretfully. "He has the reputation of being the most slippery rascal in all New York."

"He is a fightaire."

"Of that he boasts."

There was a great deal of commotion within the building, and the two men were scarcely noticed. No one gave them a second look.

"Where be ze girl?" asked Count Mirabeau.

"What you do wiz her, monsieur?"

"She is close at hand," replied Dan. "Come, we will go to her."

He led the way to the room where he had left the beautiful unknown, but, to his astonishment, she was not there. He looked around for her, half-expecting to find her crouching in some corner, but he found nothing.

The count saw the look of consternation on the face of the detective, and rightly divined its meaning.

"She ees gone?"

Dan nodded.

"You left her here?" asked the Frenchman.

"Yes."

"Where she is now?"

"That is for us to find out. I told her not to stir from this room till I returned, and she promised to obey me."

"Vera queer."

"I should say so!"

Dan began the search for the missing one—a search that proved quite as unavailing as the hunt for Battery Ben after the crook disappeared through the skylight. The girl was gone, and nobody seemed able to tell what had become of her. In fact, Dan's questioning received little attention from the excited inmates of the building, who saw increasing peril in the close proximity of the fire.

From top to bottom of the building Dan and Count Mirabeau searched, but they simply wasted their time.

"It's no use, count," declared the detective, after a time. "She is gone, and I begin to feel sure we shall not find her here."

"You t'ink—what, monsieur?"

"I do not know just what to think at present," was the frank confession. "It is very singular she should leave the room after promising to remain there."

"Perhap' she deed not leave eet of her own free wheel."

"I have thought of that. Anyway, she is gone, and we can do no good by remaining here longer. Let's get into the open air."

He led the way to the street, the count following.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT SCRIMPY SAW.

ALMOST the first person Dan's eyes fell upon as he was leaving the building was his boy assistant Scrimpy.

The gamin also saw the detective and came promptly toward him.

"I'm lookin' fer youse," he declared.

"Hello, Scrims," saluted Dan. "You are on hand."

"Like a thumb. I'm allus round where dere's excitement, you bet. How did youse come out wid der blokes on der roof?"

"I'm alive still."

"Oh, I t'ought yer was dead!" sarcastically retorted the saucy young rascal.

"Don't get gay, Scrims," admonished Dan.

"Den work yer jaw on der level. Did you send der gal off wid der Plunger?"

Dan started.

"What girl?"

"W'y, der one I saw on der roof wid yer?"

"Then you saw a girl with us there?"

"Yep. Tried ter git up dere an' take a han in der fuss, but I couldn't find no way."

"And this girl—"

"Has been taken off by Prince. I saw yer w'en yer made der jump 'crosst der gap, an' I was tryin' ter git inter dis ranch so I c'd take a han' in der fun. Dere was so menny critters runnin' out an' der firemen was goin' in so t'ick dat I got knocked back ev'ry time I tried ter make der rifle. Jest as I hed made up me mind ter git in ur shed blood, out come der Plunger wid der same gal w'at I saw wid yer on de roof. He had holt of her arman' was kinder pullin' her along. She seemed dazed kinder an' skeered so she didn't say much."

Both Dan and the count were interested to such an extent that they paid no heed at all to the throng that surged around them. The detective's hand had closed on Scrimpy's shoulder and he was following the boy's story closely.

"Which way did they go?" eagerly asked Dan.

"Dis way," replied the gamin, pointing down one of the streets.

"And you let them get away? Great Scott, Scrimps! where is all your shrewdness?"

"Oh, come off!" was the half-angry retort. "Don't youse take me fer no jay. I follered 'em."

"But you are here now."

"'Cause I can't help it, not 'cause I want ter be."

"How was it? Give it to us straight."

"Den hold yer level an' keep yer jaw still. I follered der bloke an' der gal. She didn't seem ter make much fuss till dey got ter der corner dere, den she axed him where was he takin' her."

"Go on!"

"He said he was takin' her to a place where she'd be safe. All dersame, dat didn't seem ter go wid her. She sung out: 'You're takin' me off ter shut me up somewhere!' Den der bloke swore dat wasn't so an' said he was her best friend. But she didn't swaller dat bluff, an' she tole him he'd turned ter her worst enemy. 'W'at have ye done wid me poor old fader?' she says."

"Jest dat time, dere was a cab pulled up near dere, an' der Plunger caught der gal in his arms an' lugged her toward der cab. 'Bout den I t'ought it was time ter sail in, an' I went fer him. Dere was annoder cove w'at caught me by der scruff of der neck an' flipped me feet up in der air. I set down on der top of me head an' saw high gobs of shootin' star's an't'ings. W'en I got on me props ag'in, der cab was outer sight an' I was in der soup. Den I leaned back dis way."

"Dat's der whole of der yarn, boss."

Dan was puzzled, but the Frenchman laughed in a peculiar manner.

"Did you say zis gentleman's name was Monsieur Paul Prince?" he asked.

"Dat's his signitoor," answered Scrimpy.

"I have ze honaire of know ze man," declared the count. "He is one vera great rascaille."

"Rascal?" echoed the detective.

Mirabeau bowed.

"Zat is what I say, and I can prove eet, for I know heem in Paree. He is one dev-val!"

"Why, he is from one of the best families of this city!"

"Zat make no diff'rance—he is one dev-val. Look out for heem, for he has two faces. Oh, I do not talk at ze random—I know what I say, Monsieur Double-ze-voice Dan. Zat man is not on ze—what you call him?—on ze levaile. Keep you your eye on heem and you will see something zat make you surprise."

"Look here, count," and Dan eyed the Frenchman closely; "I have taken a great fancy to you."

Mirabeau bowed profoundly.

"Zat make zis heart vera proud, monsieur," he assured, his hand on his breast. "It is one great honaire, saire."

"You say you are in hard luck?"

"Oh, not zat—*exactly*! I have ze misfortune to fose ze small amount of mona I have wiz me, saire, and, being a man of vera great pride, I weel not borra from ze friends I have in ze cita. I wait till I receive remittance from home."

"I have a fancy you can be of service to me."

"I shall be proud, monsieur," with another low bow.

"I shall consider it a favor if you will accompany me to my office."

"All raight, saire."

But before returning to the office, Dan decided to see if he could learn anything about Battery Ben. Scrimpy had seen nothing of the crook, and the detective's inquiries concerning him were fruitless.

Ben had easily escaped.

Then Dan turned his attention toward Rockvelt and his other companion, but they had also vanished. The gambler was too sharp to linger where Dan Downing could place a hand on his shoulder.

"I wonder if that old woman escaped from the roof of the burning house," muttered the detective.

On inquiring, he was informed she had been rescued by a fireman.

The building had been dry as tinder, and the flames secured a strong hold before the engines and fire-fighters arrived, so the place was doomed. The firemen understood this, and were simply holding the flames from spreading, a thing that was not difficult to do, as there was nothing like a strong wind to fan them on.

Dan wondered if the madman known as Dr. Strange had escaped from the building, but could learn nothing of him. It seemed more than possible the unfortunate old fellow had perished in the fire.

When there was nothing more to be learned, Dan left the place, accompanied by Count Mirabeau and Scrimpy.

They proceeded directly to the detective's office.

Comfortably seated, with fragrant cigars lighted, the detective observed:

"This has been a night of excitement and

hard-fought adventures, but the result is nothing. I am disgusted, to say the very least!"

"Dat's w'at's der matter wid me," nodded Scrimpy.

"If you had been able to follow Paul Prince and the girl the result might have been different."

"If youse hadn't let der gal git erway from yer, de result might have been diff'runt."

"That is so. An honest confession is good for the soul. I seem to be pretty deep in it, and that is a bald fact."

"Say."

"Say it."

"I believe I know who dat gal is."

"Yes?"

"Sure."

"What?"

"Der one w'at der Plunger uster be dead stuck on."

"Vira Selwick?"

"Jest her."

"The fancy came to me. But what makes you think so?"

"I heard de bloke call her Vira, or somet'ing dat sounded a heap like it."

"There are some things about this case that are not exactly clear yet, but I fancy the light is coming pretty soon. Paul Prince is proving something of a mystery. I do not know how to take him."

Count Mirabeau laughed.

"You had better not take heem at all, monsieur," he said. "He is one good thing to be let alone."

"You seem to know a great deal of him, count," and Dan turned toward the Frenchman.

"I do know something of heem," was the calm reply, as the count blew out a large ring of white smoke and sent sever smaller ones through it.

"Your knowledge may be of importance to me, and I am willing to pay for it."

The Frenchman suddenly drew himself up very stiffly.

"Saire, would you insult me?"

"Not intentionally. I know you French people are inclined to be touchy on such points, but why will you not consider this a matter of business? You have something I want, and I am willing to pay for it."

"No man worthy of ze name sells his honaire in such mannaire," retorted the count. "I respect you, saire, but I am not so hard up as you tink."

"Well, if you will not take money for your knowledge of Paul Prince, will you not freely tell me what you know concerning him?"

Mirabeau seemed to pause and reflect, while Dan watched him closely. After a few moments, the count made reply:

"Monsieur Double-ze-voice Dan, I have reason why I do not weesh to speak of Monsieur Prince just at present, but I give you my word of honaire you shall know what I know of heem vera soon."

But this did not exactly suit the detective, who was at a loss to quite understand all the doings of the old diamond merchant's son. He felt time to be precious, and the loss of a small amount of it might be of great damage to him, all of which he explained to the count.

Mirabeau listened attentively to the ferret, and then he said:

"Monsieur, eet is evra man's beesness to look out for heemself—you know zat. I am in zis country for a purpose, and I might do myself ze great damage eef I tell all zat I know. I do hope monsieur will not take ze offense at zis, for I have great respect for heem—vera great. In short time I will sure be able to tell heem all he weesh to know, and I promaise heem great surprise."

He was so suave and smooth that it was impossible to show resentment, and Dan did not forget how the Frenchman had stood by him through thick and thin, proving himself a man of courage and nerve. Therefore, discovering it would be impossible to obtain anything from the Frenchman, the detective was obliged to remain content.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COUNT'S WARNING.

HANSON PRINCE, the old diamond merchant, was in his library, enjoying the cool breeze of early morning, which came through an open window. The man was an early riser, and he usually spent an hour in the library before partaking of breakfast, a singular habit for one of his luxurious tastes to fall into.

This morning he seemed sorely troubled. There was a dark cloud on his face, and he would occasionally draw a deep breath, as if his thoughts were not of an agreeable nature. He found it impossible to rest comfortably in his chair by the window, and so he paced up and down the floor, now and then seating himself for a few moments.

Prince was not a man inclined to rigid discipline, but he had lived a fairly upright life, and the course of his only son was troubling him greatly. He had placed high hopes on Paul, for the boy had seemed all that was bright and

promising, but it now seemed that all his hopes were vain.

It was not his habit to smoke in the morning, but, utterly unconscious of what he was doing, he lighted a cigar. Still he only took a few pulls at it, and then he allowed it to go out, forgetting he held it tightly clinched between his teeth.

At times, when he would leave the chair, he would stand by the window and stare blankly into the little yard at the back of the magnificent house. Birds were twittering in the shadows of a little rustic arbor, but he heeded them not.

Not being a man accustomed to utter his thoughts aloud, one could only judge of them by the expression of his face and the nervous movement of his hands, which occasionally trembled a little, as if with the unsteady touch of approaching age.

Once he smiled, but it was in a manner that made his face actually repellent. It seemed as if some pleasant thought had striven to enter his mind, but had been overcome by the somber ones already there.

He paid no heed to the sound of the door-bell, and was quite unconscious when a black servant entered the room with a card on a receiver. The negro was obliged to cough several times before Hanson Prince turned toward him.

"Eh?" exclaimed the diamond merchant in surprise. "What is it, John?"

"A gentleman has sent you his card, sir."

"A gentleman—his card—at this time in the morning? No, sir—no! He cannot be a gentleman! Why, I have not eaten—tell him that."

"So I did, sir."

"And he did not go away, eh? No? Well, well! What can such a person want?"

"He insisted on seeing you, sir."

"And you called him a gentleman, John—yes, you did! Why, have you no ability to discern a gentleman from a common man? Is all your time in this house spent in vain? It must be—yes, must be. Where is this—person?"

"In the parlor."

"Um! Tell him I am sick in bed—tell him I will not see him—tell him anything."

"Very well, sir."

But, as the servant was turning away, the over-particular diamond merchant remembered he had not looked at the card of the importunate visitor.

"Stop, John."

"Yes, sir."

"The card."

Mr. Prince held out his hand, and the card was brought to him. The eyes which were keen enough to tell the different shades in the value of a diamond or detect the tiniest flaw needed no spectacles to enable them to read the name engraved on the pure white square.

"Count Fabian Mirabeau," he read aloud.

"Well, this is singular—this is strange. A count—evidently a Frenchman. I wonder if they have a habit in France of making calls at such an outrageous hour? Perhaps so—perhaps that is the explanation. I will see him."

John was well accustomed to his master's eccentricities, and so he thought nothing of the sudden change.

"Where will you receive him, sir?"

"Here—let him come here."

The servant bowed and retired, leaving Prince standing near the window, studying the card in his hand and scowling somewhat.

A few moments later Count Mirabeau was in the presence of the diamond merchant. "Monsieur, I have ze great honaire—ze vera great honaire—to salute you." The count made a low and graceful obeisance, his manner being that of the thorough Frenchman.

"Will you be seated, sir?" said Prince, feeling a sudden drawing toward the odd-appearing foreigner. "To what do I owe the honor of this most unexpected call?"

"Saire, I hear of you in Paree—you, ze great diamond merchant. I have one great desire to meet you. For a long time I do look forward to zis day, and I—"

Hanson stopped the speaker with a gesture.

"Enough, Count Mirabeau," he said, somewhat sharply. "I am not a man whose head is turned by flattery, and you speak too openly for me to appreciate your words."

"I beg ze gentleman's pardon," gravely bowed the count, and for some reason Prince fancied the eyes behind the goggles twinkled maliciously. "I speak affaire ze way of my countrymen. We are not like ze American—we say out what we mean."

"And some things you do not entirely mean, I fear. I am a plain American, sir—yes, sir. This is not my hour for receiving visitors."

A shadow swept across the Frenchman's face and his pointed mustache seemed to bristle, as, like ice, he observed:

"I beg monsieur's pardon, but I am a man of ze world, and I know zis is not ze hour for calling in America. Steel, I have sometimes business zat take up much of my othere time, and I take zis occasion to call here, for I do know zat you be not occupy now."

"How did you know that?"

"I hear it."

"That is strange—very strange. Well, well, no offense—no offense. It is all right. Of course your business is urgent—very urgent—or

you would not have called. All things are pardonable under such circumstances—nearly all things."

"I thank you, saire," bowed the count. "I deed not come on beesness zat concern me so vera close, but—"

"I do not exactly understand you. You put a strange accent on your words and stop in a significant manner with 'but.' But what, sir, but what?"

The count hesitated and seemed embarrassed, while the merchant prince was plainly nervous and anxious to get at the reason for such an untimely call. After a few seconds, the Frenchman seemed to force himself to come to the point.

"Eet is of your son, monsieur, I do weesh to speak."

Hanson Prince started and turned paler than before, if possible.

"My son?" he faltered.

"Oui."

"What do you know of him?" harshly demanded the merchant.

Mirabeau shrugged his shoulders.

"Remembraire I come as your friend," he said.

"You must regard me as such, saire."

Prince caught the Frenchman by the arm.

"I understand—I understand!" he hoarsely uttered. "It is to be another blow! I have felt it coming—felt it! Tell me all—anything—everything! I will listen—I am ready to hear it!"

The count fell back a step, shaking the nervous hand from his arm.

"I am afraid I have come at ze wrong time, monsieur; you seem vera much disturb."

But Prince urged his visitor to go on.

"I am ready to hear anything—everything you have to say. Speak out."

"What eef I tell you zat ze young man you call your son is one vera great rascaille, monsieur?"

"I should hope you could not prove it true—I should hope you were lying."

"But you would fear I tell ze trute, eh? Well, I do know Monsieur Paul in Patee."

"Yes, yes!"

"He mingaile wiz ze worst class."

Hanson Prince closed his teeth firmly to keep back the groan that sought utterance.

"Have you proof of this?"

"I have, saire."

"And I put such utter trust in my boy!"

"Paul Prince do live vera fast—ze Paul zat come back to America."

"The Paul that came back to America? What do you mean? I do not understand. There seems a hidden meaning in your words. There is no other Paul."

Again that expressive shrug of the shoulders.

"Mana strange things do happen in zis world, monsieur. Sometime I open your eyes to one wondaireful fraud."

A second time Hanson Prince caught the count by the arm.

"Look here, sir," fell almost savagely from his lips; "I have suffered enough without having you come here to add to my tortures by your hints and hidden meanings. Speak out like a man! Just what you have to tell concerning my boy—my Paul? What do you know?"

"I know vera much," was the reply. "In heem you are deceive. Look out for heem or he will bring you to ze ruin! He is no true son of yours!"

"You infernal liar!" cried a hoarse voice, that was choked with passion.

Then Paul Prince leaped into the room from behind some portieres, where he had been concealed.

CHAPTER XVII.

A COOL COUNT.

It was evident the young Plunger had been playing the eavesdropper and remained quiet as long as possible.

His face was black with passion, and he glared at Count Mirabeau as if he would annihilate the Frenchman.

The foreigner remained remarkably cool under the circumstances, calmly facing the young man, not appearing at all startled by Paul's unexpected appearance.

Hanson Prince betrayed his alarm, but he did not seem to have strength to place himself between the two men, although he started to do so.

"Out of the way, father!" frothed the younger man. "I will ram his cursed lies down his throat!"

A sound that was half a laugh and half an exclamation of scorn and derision came from the lips of the Frenchman.

"You know eet is no lie, you young dev-val!" he hissed. "It is ze trute—ze whole trute! I know you for what you are. Keep your distance!"

Like a flash, a revolver appeared in the hand of the speaker, and it was leveled at the head of Paul Prince.

The Plunger recoiled, his hand lifted.

"I keep myself heel for such as you, saire," bowed the count. "I have ze great record in ze field of honaire; I can hit ze centaire of ze bull's-

eye every time. I hope you weel not make it necessary for me to deesplay my skeel."

The sudden appearance of the revolver had taken Paul completely by surprise, and he dared not attack the Frenchman, for he saw the hammer of the self-cocking weapon rise slightly before the pressure of a finger on the trigger. Plainly Count Mirabeau was a dangerous man—a man ready for any and all emergencies.

Hanson Prince scarcely knew what move to make, but the natural solicitude for the welfare of his own child rose in his breast as he saw Paul menaced by a deadly weapon.

"Careful, careful!" he cried, catching at Mirabeau's arm, but being baffled by a sudden sidelong movement of the Frenchman. "You must be deranged—yes, sir, deranged! What are you doing? Zounds! Do you dare such a thing in my house—in the house of a gentleman?"

"I beg ze monsieur's pardon," came smoothly from the lips shaded by that waxed mustache. "Et seemed ze best way to avoid ze ruffian fight in zis place. You people in America fight so vera quick and wiz your feests. You go bill-bill—knock 'em out—keek, punch, anyting. Zat is not ze way gentlemen settaile such thing in France."

"Put down that revolver!" grated Paul.

"And have ze brute fight wiz you, saire? I beg to be excuse."

"You are a cowardly dog!"

Mirabeau shrugged his shoulders.

"You say zat? Well, I think you know bettaire. Eef you believe zat, to-morrow at sunrise I meet you anywhere and wiz any weapon you may peek. I shoot you t'rough ze heart or I run you t'rough ze body wiz ze sword. Now dare you say I am coward?"

"Yes, I do say so! No man will draw a weapon on another in such a manner as this unless he is a cowardly cur!"

"I do eet to keep from ze feest fight here in ze gentleman's house—ze brutaille slugger fight."

"Oh, that is another lie! You are nothing more than a most contemptible French brag-

gart!"

"Father, I happened to hear some things this sneaking dog was saying about me, and now I will tell you what he is. He is a blackmailer—a bogus count in search of a foolish American heiress who is ready to buy a title. He claims to have known me in Paris, but it is another of his lies."

"I can bring ze proof."

"Bah! You can prove nothing!"

"You think zat? Well, I will make you think diff'runt before a vera great while. Don't think I do not remembraire all ze insult you fleeng in my face here, saire, for I do remembraire zem all. I make you pay for zem, and I make you pay vera dear."

The Plunger smote his hands together.

"Hear the miserable cur!" he foamed. "He is ready with his bluff so long as he keeps that revolver in hand, so he can shoot me when I attempt to give him the thrashing he should have. I would like to get my hands on him!"

"You may have zat privilege vera soon, saire."

"You will not dare give me the chance."

"Perhap' you think zat, but you do fool yourself. Of you I have not ze least fear."

"Another lie!"

"I am no blackmailer, monsieur," asserted the count, addressing Hanson Prince. "Zis person do not tell ze trute when he say zat."

But the diamond merchant had begun to look on the Frenchman with suspicion.

"I am not so sure of that," he retorted—"not so sure. Your manner is very strange for a gentleman—exceeding strange! You seem to forget where you are, sir!"

His words seemed to cut the Frenchman more than all the taunts of the Plunger.

"You think zat, monsieur? I am vera sorra. But ze time shall come when you will understand eet all much bettaire. I am not ready to make ze full explain just now, but I weel make eet soon."

Paul laughed sneeringly.

"Do you think any one foolish enough to take stock in such guff? You can make no explanation. You came here, without doubt, for the purpose of raising money by some of your black-mailing stories; but you have been baffled, and now you seek a loophole to escape from."

"It certainly looks that way," agreed the diamond merchant—"it surely appears so."

"Shall I call an officer, father, and have him turned over to the police?"

"Perhaps you had better do that."

Mirabeau laughed.

"Oh, gentleman, you would not do zat?"

"Wouldn't we?" retorted Paul. "Well, you will find out we just would!"

"I am not much of ze sportaine man," smile the count; "but I weel bet you two to one zat you weel not do anyting of ze kind."

"You bet! You have not a sou!"

"I give you my papare for ze sum."

"Well, that is good! Ha! ha! ha! Your paper! You have nerve!"

"You weel not take eet?"

"I should say not!"

Again Mirabeau shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, vera well."

"Keep watch of him, father," admonished Paul. "I am going for an officer."

He started toward the door.

"Stop!"

The word fell from Count Mirabeau's lips, and it was a command. The Frenchman did not menace the young man with the revolver; instead of that, he returned the weapon to his pocket and stood with hands on his hips.

Paul involuntarily paused.

"You weel not go for ze officare," asserted the Frenchman, his manner being confident.

"I certainly shall," was the reply; and Paul again moved to leave the room.

"Stop, Ferril Costagan!"

The Plunger paused, as if turned to stone, his face turned toward the one who uttered the command. He had suddenly grown pale as a corpse.

"I do not think you had bettaire go for ze officare," sweetly smiled the count.

Paul Prince wheeled back into the room and came toward the Frenchman, his hands clinched and his whole form trembling with fear or passion, or a combination of both.

"Who the deuce are you?" he hoarsely demanded, his voice being far from steady.

The foreigner bowed gracefully.

"Count Fabian Mirabeau, at your service, monsieur," he replied.

"More likely you are an agent of Satan!"

"I do no deal wiz your ma-staire, saire."

"What did you mean by calling me that name?"

"What name?"

"The one you spoke as I was about to leave the room."

"What was eet?"

"You know."

"And you do not dare repeat eet, eh? Oh-ah! I see—I understand. You do not want your farzare to hear eet."

"You lie!"

The young man saw there was no longer a weapon in the count's hand, and like a tiger, he sprung upon the Frenchman, who seemed quite unprepared for the assault.

But Mirabeau's appearance was very deceptive, for he was fully expecting such a move on the young Plunger's part, and he was ready to meet it.

Paul seemed to have the advantage of the sudden attack, but he did not succeed in hurling the Frenchman violently to the floor, as he had intended. The count's supple body bent before the assault, but Paul was not able to fasten a grip upon the foreigner's throat, as he tried to do.

"Zat does not work, inonsieur," said Fabian, scornfully. "You do seem determaine to have ze brutaille fight."

"I will kill you, curse you!"

"I am one hard man to keel."

"You shall never fill this city with your lies about me!"

"Eet is not ze lies you fear—eet is ze trute."

Then the struggle became so desperate there was scarcely a chance for words.

For some moments Hanson Prince looked on as if stupefied. At length, recovering himself somewhat, he made a feeble attempt to part the struggling men, but was unsuccessful.

"Keep away, father!" grated Paul. "I will do him up. He'll never come here with any more of his lies!"

Mr. Prince wrung his hands helplessly.

"This is terrible!" he groaned.

Neither of the struggling men had delivered a blow, but they seemed desirous of fastening hands on each other's throats. Once or twice they tripped over some piece of furniture, but they did not lose their footing, and it was plain they were very nearly evenly matched. This was quite surprising to Paul, for he had counted on easily handling the slender count, being an athlete of repute. But the count was deceptive in many ways, and the Plunger found his antagonist had nerves of steel.

But fortune favored Paul.

The count tripped over an ottoman, and was forced backward on a small couch.

"Ha! ha!" savagely laughed Paul. "I have you now!"

The Frenchman's lips were close to his enemy's ear, and he whispered a few words which were heard only by Paul.

Then came a sudden change.

The young Plunger seemed robbed of his strength by those words, and Mirabeau quickly whirled him to the floor, breaking free of Paul's grasp.

"I have no desire to remain here and make furthaire trouble, monsieur," he calmly declared, bowing low toward the old diamond merchant.

"Bon jour."

A moment later he had vanished.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEAUTIFUL SIREN.

COUNT MIRABEAU tripped lightly down the steps of the old diamond merchant's home, a strange look of satisfaction on his dark face. He seemed quite pleased with the result of his visit and not at all ruffled by the struggle through which he had just passed.

To say the very least, the count was a strange man. He seemed to have a purpose in all he did, but no one but himself fully understood what his purpose was.

He had taken his walking-stick from the rack in the hall, and he now made his way down the avenue with an easy, swinging stride—a step that was not in the least stilted or artificial. His form was as straight as an Indian's, the long-skirted black coat being buttoned tightly across his breast. His appearance at a little distance was rather aristocratic, but his clothes were a trifle too shabby to bear close inspection.

The casual observer would scarcely have been inclined to believe the man possessed of unusual strength, but had not such been the case, he could not have proved a match for such an athletic fellow as Paul Prince. True, Paul had seemed to obtain the advantage finally, but it was brought about by an accidental tripping, not by superior strength or skill.

From the look on the count's face as he made his way down the avenue, one would have imagined he had enjoyed a most pleasant call on the Diamond Prince.

The count did not look back. Had he done so suddenly, he might have detected a man who was cautiously following him.

That man was Paul Prince.

The young Plunger was shadowing the Frenchman.

Count Mirabeau seemed to have a distinctive objective point in view, for he betrayed no hesitation in shaping his course. He did not go so very far down the avenue before he turned into another street. Soon finding his way to a car, he was not long in reaching his destination.

He was in the "Tenderloin District" when he ascended the steps of a rather aristocratic-appearing "apartment" building.

Glancing at the cards beneath the speaking-tubes, the odd Frenchman soon found the one he sought. The name printed upon it was—

"MRS. AMY RANDOLPH."

Something like a sneering laugh came from Mirabeau's mustache-shaded lips.

He did not press the button beneath the card, but rung the janitor's bell instead.

After a length of time that was inclined to impress the visitor with the importance of his dignified position, the black face of an intelligent-appearing negro appeared at the door.

Count Mirabeau seemed to know how to deal with janitors, for, although he had acknowledged to Double-voice Dan he was "hard up," he did not hesitate about slipping a silver half-dollar into the negro's hand.

Immediately the freedom of the entire building was his.

In a short time, Count Mirabeau was gently knocking at the door of Mrs. Randolph's rooms.

The rap was answered by a ruddy-faced and clean-looking German maid, and the Frenchman permitted her to take his card to Mrs. Randolph, while he waited in the parlor.

After a lapse of about ten minutes, the woman he had called to see entered the room.

A glance showed the count he was in the presence of a most entrancingly beautiful female—a woman certainly not more than twenty-eight or thirty years old and looking half-a-dozen years younger.

She was dressed in a light morning gown that was quite a poem in itself, being of fine and expensive material and plainly fitted to the form it adorned by a tailor of high repute—presumably a foreigner. From beneath this peeped the toe of a delicate kid slipper, a slipper that surely concealed a small and shapely foot. The absence of over-display in the way of adornments of any kind told that the woman was one whose taste might be considered correct, even though she could afford the expense of a Worth gown for morning wear.

But it was not the gown that attracted Count Mirabeau's attention; it was the face of the woman who wore it. The Frenchman saw in a moment he was in the presence of a dark-eyed Hebe, whose beauty was of the ravishing nature that steals away the reason of sober men and lures the most upright into paths which lead to the shadowy Valley of Ruin. He saw before him a creature whose influence he instantly recognized as strongly potent for good or evil, accordingly as she might choose to exert it.

Her hair was black as gloomy midnight, and although her eyes were also dark, away down in their melting depths there was a glint as of moonlight on the bosom of a sleeping lake. Her face was as fair as that of a child, and in her cheeks was the warm color of blessed youth. Above the gloriously beautiful eyes arched the brows in a manner that seemed to tell of the proud blood in the veins of the queenly creature; and the low forehead was untouched by the tracing-pencil of Time. The ripe lips of healthy red were like the curve of Cupid's bow, while her chin was one for a poet to rave over. Her throat was white, round and pure as new milk.

Many a man would have been stricken dumb at suddenly finding himself in the presence of such a peerless creature, but Count Mirabeau

did not lose his head for a single instant, although he was filled with wonder at the thought of such a woman being anything that was not pure, noble and lovable.

Before him the Frenchman saw the most perfect work of a Divine Creator, so far as outward seeming went, and through his mind flashed the thought that the gods had intended her for an angel on earth. By what evil chance, then, had her life been turned into a channel that polluted it and dragged her into the eddying flood of sin that sweeps resistlessly onward to the boundless Ocean of Destruction?

Mirabeau saluted the woman with the grace of a knight of olden time.

"I beg ze madame pardon for ze intrusion, but I have ze reason—ze vera good reason."

"You have said quite enough in the way of apology, Count Mirabeau," she replied, smiling graciously. "Pray be seated. I regard this visit as an honor to be esteemed and cherished in memory."

Not to be outdone in the way of flattering words, the cool Frenchman bowed low, his hand on his heart, replying:

"Ze madame must grant me grace eef I say I am ze one who feel ze great bonaire in being notice at all by one creature so divine. My use of ze Eenglish language will not let me say ze things zat I do feel in my heart, and ze glass I have to wear ovaire my eyes do not let zem speak for me. At ze saime time, I think zat you may feel ze words I cannot say."

She laughed softly, sweetly, showing two rows of natural teeth that were white as milk, and again she motioned him to a chair, sinking down in a graceful pose on an easy couch.

Not till then did the count resume his seat, and for one brief instant he found himself at a loss for the words he wished to use in introducing his subject. However, she gave him time to collect himself by speaking herself.

"You come from Paris? Ah, yes! I love it! Paris—pompant, rejui!"

The Frenchman started.

"Do you speak ze French?" he quickly asked.

She shook her queenly head, her smile having a mingling of sadness and regret.

"I regret to say I do not, count, and it is all the fault of what we Americans rather harshly designate as laziness. I have had plenty of opportunity, but it has been too much trouble for me to do anything more than pick up a slight smattering—a few catch-words and phrases."

"I have one hard struggle wiz ze Eenglish," frankly confessed the count. "I do not get him all yet, but I have some grip zat I hold fast. I get heem pretty soon."

"I only wish I had your courage in regard to French. I am continually looking forward to my next visit to gay Paree, but my inability to converse in the language of the country puts a serious damper on my spirits. However, some day I shall—pardon a bit of American slang—get a brace on. Then I will engage a competent instructor and settle down to it in earnest. If I can only hold fast to my determination!"

"Whoever zat instructor is, he shall have my vera great envy."

The wily Frenchman said this in his most "killing" manner, and his accent made it all the more effective. It was a center shot, and apparently it reached the bull's-eye.

Mrs. Randolph's eyes drooped and a tide of color swept into her cheeks. Whatever had been the woman's life, she had not forgotten how to blush in a most artistic manner.

But Fabian Mirabeau felt no elation over the apparent success of his subtle flattery, for he had fully "sized up" the woman and knew the kind of a person to whom he was talking. Being in many respects a man of the world, the soft blush of a beautiful and sensuous siren was accentuated by him for exactly what it was worth.

He placed but little value upon it, although he admired the woman for her ability to summon the soft tint of pink to her cheeks and neck. He could but wonder how she could do it.

"Ah, count!" she laughed, "could you speak the most perfect English, with no trace of that delightful accent, I should know you for a Frenchman. They are all flatterers of the most cunning craft, and a woman never knows if they are saying what they mean."

"Oh, madame, zat is cruaille! By zat you make ze direc' thrust at me—and I defenseless in your presaince. How could any one to you say anything zat he does not mean! He would be one monstaire!"

His protest was so vehement that it amused her. She was growing interested in the man, and for the time she forgot he had not made known his reason for calling on her. There was a subtle something about the count that attracted women to him, even though he made no effort to do so.

"I fear you are like the others," relentlessly persisted the beautiful woman. "I should not dare trust you."

"Madame, you could trust me to ze ends of ze earth."

"You mean I could trust you at one end if I were at the other."

"How can you say zat when you know I deed not mean eet. You have me at your mercy, and you make ze sport of me. I have obtain woudair

why ze most beautiful are sometimes ze most cruaille."

"There you go again, count! I believe I must have a motto for this room—one that will read 'No Flattery.' But you also have the audacity to call me cruaille! How dare you!"

"I give zat up. I am vera much astonish at my own boldness, I do assure you."

She laughed once more.

"We have gotten on easy terms in remarkably short time," she said, as she arose and secured a box of cigarettes from a delicately ornamented smoking stand. "Say, let me talk out just what I mean, will you?"

She offered him the cigarettes as she was speaking, and he accepted one of them, with thanks. She also selected one, rolled it deftly between her tapering fingers and pulled little bits of loose tobacco from the ends. Then she struck a wax match and held it toward her visitor, allowing him to light his cigarette from the burning bit in her hand. After this, she stood before him till she had lighted her own; and then she pushed an easy-chair directly before him, flinging herself down in it, her pose being both graceful and comfortable.

The Frenchman had watched every movement closely, feeling the woman before him was one worth studying. He recognized in her a creature of voluptuous tastes, without having that "fleshiness" which such women, when gifted with intellect, justly regard as a curse.

Say what you may, at no time does a woman of the world look more alluring than when she is smoking a cigarette, taking those short, quick pulls which swell out her throat and make her look bird-like.

Something of this kind the count tried to express in his imperfect English, but she cut him short by repeating her question:

"Let me tell you just what I think, will you?"

"Out, out! certainly, madame."

"You will not be offended?"

"Nevaire at anything from your lips."

"Well, then, here goes: I don't take any stock at all in your being a count. In fact, I do not believe you are any more a count than I am a countess. There you have it, straight from the shoulder—biff! Is it a knock-out?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A KEEN WOMAN.

THE beautiful woman had suddenly relapsed into slang of the most pronounced sort, and for the moment Count Mirabeau experienced the revulsion of a man to whose nostrils a passing zephyr brings a faintly repugnant odor while he wanders amid the bloom-meads of June.

This sensation passed almost instantly, for the charming siren indolently reclined before him in a posture of negligent grace and repose, the soft smile on her red lips taking some of the harshness from the words she had just uttered.

Before coming there, he had anticipated the fact that he was to face the keenest adventures in all New York, and, if her beauty and manner of receiving him had caused him to forget that for an instant, it was brought back to him with redoubled force by her final words.

He had come there to read her—to make her a study and to force her to serve him in accomplishing his mission in the metropolis, if possible; but she had suddenly aroused him to the fact that he was being analyzed in turn. Already she fancied she detected a flaw in his polished exterior, and she did not appear to have the least hesitation about investigating.

That did not please him to any great extent, although it is possible there was some satisfaction in knowing he was dealing with a creature of brains—one that might become a foeman worthy of his skill.

She was watching the Frenchman's face closely, and it was possible she felt a tinge of disappointment because her blunt words did not produce a more pronounced effect, for Mirabeau's features were well under control.

There was no show of dismay on the Frenchman's part; mild and offended surprise alone being apparent.

"Madame," he said slowly, "I fear zat I do not quite understan' all zat you mean. Is eet a joke?"

Her red lips curled back from the milky teeth for an instant, giving the faintest suggestion of a cat showing her fangs in play; but the look was only a flash that faded before one of genuine merriment.

"A joke!" she laughed. "Well, call it that, and still—"

"I fear I do not comprehend zese American jokes. Zey have zere point concealed. You say 'and yet,' zen you stop. And yet—what?"

"And yet I fancied I might be cutting close to the truth. You know we have so many foreigners who come to us with titles attached to their names that—well, one never knows just what to think."

"I suppose zat is so."

"It is. I presume I shall have to accept you as on the dead level. Anyway, we will let it go at that."

"But," suddenly straightening up a bit, and becoming sober, "I have filled your ears with

silly chatter, and kept you from telling why you called."

"If your talk is what you call ze seely chatter, zen zat must be ze American name for most delightful museek," bowed the count.

She threw back her head as she laughed, showing her throat. It was a beautiful throat, and she knew it.

"You are simply an incorrigible flatterer, and that is putting it mildly."

The count shook his head and protested, but she would not take him seriously.

"Madame," he said, at length, "you wonder why I call. Perhaps it was to see ze beautiful one, of who I have heard so vera much."

"There you go again!"

"Well, zen, perhaps eet was for some ozare t'ing. *Oui*—I confess eet. But when I find myself wiz you, eet is so vera hard to speak of zat. Perhaps I had better go away wizout say anything of eet."

"No, no! I will not hear to that. Now you are here, you must confess your mission."

He still seemed reluctant, but she would hear to nothing else.

"Vera well, zen I weel have to tell you a story."

"That is delightful!"

"Maybe so—maybe not so. Are you ready to leesten?"

"Yes—no, wait."

She settled herself on the couch once more, arranging some of the softest cushions beneath her in a comfortable manner. Then she drew languidly on the cigarette till, from a mouthful of smoke, she was able to send out several tiny rings of bluish-white.

He watched her patiently, interestedly, fancying within his heart she might not be so perfectly at her ease if she knew the true cause of his being there.

"Now I am ready—wait!" Again that word fell from her lips. "Touch the bell at your elbow, count. We will have some wine."

"I weel reeng ze bell, madame; but you need have no wine bring for me."

She stared at him with her eyes wide open, and full of wonder, seeming to doubt the evidence of her own shell-like ears.

"No wine?" she repeated doubtfully.

"Not for me, madame," bowed Mirabeau, respectfully. "I fear eet may not seem ze raigt t'ing, but I nevaire dreeng eet, so I do hope I shall be excuse'."

She clinched one hand and made a decisive gesture in the air.

"I knew it!" she cried, triumphantly.

"What?"

"You claim to be a Frenchman?"

"*Oui, madame.*"

"From Paris?"

"*Oui.*"

"And a count?"

"*Oui.*"

"And you do not drink?"

"Nevaire."

"That is a dead give-away."

"How you mean?"

"There never was a Frenchman—from Paris—a count, who would refuse wine—*never!*"

Mirabeau smiled.

"You t'ink zat, madame?"

"I know it! I do not dispute your being French; but you are not a count—you are not from Paris. Take my advice, if you wish to be accepted for what you claim, learn to drink wine. I will give you instructions. Touch the bell, please."

"I will touch ze bell, madame, but I assure you I cannot be induce to accept ze dreeng."

"Not even from me?"

"Not even from you."

She knit her pretty brows in a scowl and pursed her lips poutingly, her displeasure being apparent. But she did not display half the displeasure she felt, for she was not at all accustomed to having any man refuse to drink wine with her—and in her own rooms, at that!

"Ring the bell, please."

The count obeyed.

The maid promptly answered the call, and Mrs. Randolph gave her order.

There was a smile on the lips of the count, and his angles seemed to stand out more prominently than ever just then; but he simply shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

The woman laughed, as she surveyed the aspect of her visitor, but she felt confident he would succumb to her artful blandishments. She was not accustomed to dealing with men who could resist her soft cajolery, and she doubted if such men existed.

"You will have time to begin the story, before Gretchen returns, monsieur," she said, as she dropped the still-smoking cigarette into a large urn that stood handy for its reception. "You will fairly get under way when the wine will appear in time to oil your tongue."

"Vera well, madame. Eet is ze story of a young American—one whose fazare is vera reech."

"The only young Americans in whom I take the least interest, count. You have struck the right kind of a hero to interest me from the very start."

The man bowed. He was very sober now, as

she observed. Something in his manner increased her interest in the story he was about to tell.

"Zis young American he have ze name of—well, call eet Frank Keeng."

"Frank King?"

"*Oui, madame.*"

"I like the name, and so my interest increases with wonderful rapidity. I am interested in Kings and Princes."

He did not start, though he fully understood the double play she had made on the words. It was best that he should pretend not to comprehend just then, although she would discover ere he had finished the story that he had been fully alive to her pun.

"Well, madame, zis Frank Keeng he do have a fazare zat is reech and praud of his son. Zis fazare is vera good to ze boy—take a great interest in heem. He believe he will make ze great man and be know all ovaire ze world, for he be something of an artist. He do love to sketch—draw—paint."

"Ze young Monsieur Keeng he do not dreeng at all, like me—he hev no taste for eet. Eef a man do not like anything, he is one great fool to dreeng it. Frank Keeng he thinks zat, and he see so much of ze ruaine zat dreeng do work zat he have a fear eet will grow on heem if he take a leetle of eet now and zen."

"Young Keeng learn all zere is to know of ze art in zis country, and zen he t'ink he love to go to Paree—to Itala. His fazare find zis out, he send heem to zem place."

"Ah! madame do get vera interest?"

In truth Mrs. Randolph was interested, for she had started from the soft cushions and was listening with her curving lips parted, breathing softly. The attitude was one of unconscious expectancy and anxiety.

She seemed confused when she discovered how she had betrayed herself, and sunk back on the cushions laughing shortly—a trifle harshly. Mirabeau saw that much of her gentle beauty had faded before a hard look that had crept over her flexible face. He had been astonished in the first place by her look of almost child-like purity and innocence, for he was accustomed to read those of her class by a glance at their faces. There is almost always something about the contour of a sinful woman's mouth that betrays her true character to the experienced eyes of a man of the world. The Frenchman now fancied he saw the mouth of the woman before him assuming that indescribable outline that he knew so well as distinguishing the class to which she belonged, and it was wonderful how so slight a change robbed her of the gentle softness of her beauty. She was still beautiful, but there was a repellent sterility about it, to one inclined to look beneath the surface.

"Yes, I confess your story interested—or was it your delightful accent? Really, I cannot say."

"But, here is the wine, Monsieur Count."

He recognized the derision in her confession of the title he claimed, but he paid no attention to it.

The maid placed the champagne and glasses upon a little table, which she drew close to Mrs. Randolph's elbow. The bottle had been opened, and the woman poured out the bubbling liquid, not, however, without spilling a little, thus betraying the fact that her hand was not as steady as it might be.

"Now, count," she smiled, gently holding a glass of the sparkling beverage toward him, "you surely will not be ungallant enough to refuse—you cannot be!"

"I will take ze wine," he answered, "and touch ze glasses wiz you, but I shall nevaire leet it to my lips."

She instantly sat down the glass and arose to her feet, her face like marble, the shifting light in her eyes turned to a steady glare.

"Bah!" she cried, with an outflinging of one pure white hand. "Why continue this deception longer? Throw off the mask, as it does not deceive me! Stand forth in your true light!"

"What does ze madame mean?" serenely asked the Frenchman.

"Mean—you know what I mean! I can read men, and I have read you. You are no count."

"Pray, what am I, zen?"

"I take you for a French detective," she answered.

CHAPTER XX.

COMING TO THE POINT.

MIRABEAU laughed.

"What make you t'ink zat?" he questioned.

"I have my reasons. You do not deny it, which shows I am right."

"Be not so sure of zat, madame."

"Do you still claim to be a count?"

"Not eef ze madame do not like eet."

She made a savage gesture.

"It is not whether I like it or not; but it is whether it is the truth or not."

"Is zat ze way you put eet?"

"Yes."

"Zen you want me to say I am not any count, eh?"

She bent toward him, her face shadowed by the anger she felt.

"I would like to hear the truth from your lips,

monsieur. You have the manners of a gentleman, and I trust you are such—even though you are no count."

"Evan zough I am a detective?"

"Yes."

He laughed.

"Oh, you exasperate mel!" she cried, flinging herself down on the sofa once more.

"And you do not like zat?"

"No woman likes it. Come, monsieur, confess."

"Well, if eet will please you, madame, I will confess I am not a count."

Her face lighted.

"But you *are* a detective?"

"Ah, madame, zat I do deny."

She caught her breath.

"Truly?"

"I am sobaire."

"I wonder if I can believe you?"

Mirabeau made a gesture of reproach.

"How can you say zat!"

She regarded him searchingly for several minutes, seeming in doubt; but at length she flung out her right hand, as if considering it settled.

"It makes no difference to me whether you are a detective or not," she declared. "I have no reason to fear you."

He lifted his hand to his mustache in a careless manner, but she almost fancied it was to conceal the look upon his face, and once more she was keenly on the alert. She began to think it possible the man's visit was for something other than a pleasant purpose.

"Shall I return to ze story, madame?"

"Oh, yes; I suppose so," she sighed, her manner being that of a person bored—an air he knew she assumed and did not truly feel. "You will not drink the wine? Very well. I see I made a mistake in my estimation of you"—sarcastically. "I trust that you will pardon me." With that she drained one of the glasses.

Whatever were his feelings, he did not betray them on the surface, as he bowed his acknowledgment to her liberty. He waited till she had selected another cigarette and lighted it; then, when she was well settled back on the cushions, he resumed:

"Monsieur Keeng he send hees son to ze ozare country to feenish hees art studies. Ze young man study in Itala and make vera great go ahead. He have ze stuff in heem zat make heem stick to hees beesness vera snug, and he do not mind ze prit-tee Itala girl zat try to—what you call eet—mash heem. He keep away from ze drink, too."

"But ze young man go, at last, to Paree. Oh, eet be vera bad for heem! Paree is gay—you say '*pimpant, rejoui*.' Zat be ze trute. Eet is bad place for young man. Young Keeng do not forget hees fazare, but he get in ze gay go-round—ze whirl. He was young, laively, full of ze blood; he like to laugh—like ze good time."

"That is natural," languidly observed Mrs. Randolph. "But I feel my interest in the young man on the wane. I fancied he was something of a *rara avis*, but I begin to suspect he was much like all the others."

"I am not hold heem up for any saint," protested the Frenchman.

"Well, how in the world can the adventures and downfall—for you are plainly approaching his downfall—of this young man concern me?"

Mirabeau shrugged his shoulders.

"Of zat you may judge when you have hear zem all."

The woman stifled a yawn.

"Oh, well, make it short, count."

"Ze young man have vera good time in Paree, so he do neglect his studies sometime. Ze leetle French girl they be vera great on ze attract. Zen he do meet some ozare Americans in ze place. They take heem round and give heem ze jolly time."

"That's the stuff," nodded the woman, as she blew out a cloud of white smoke. But the narrator fancied she was not near as unconcerned as she appeared, and her under jaw seemed squared in a suggestive manner, as if she had made up her mind to meet something boldly.

"One of ze Americans," continued Mirabeau, "was vera much like young Monsieur Keeng—in trute, eet was hard to tell zem apart. Everywhere zey be take for brozars—tween brozars. Zey geet to be vera great friend in much short time, and zat is bad t'ing to do—fooleesh!"

"Zis ozare young man, zat we will call Monsieur Ferril, he do know a vera charmeeng American lady zat is in Paree. Would Monsieur Keeng like to meet her? Monsieur Keeng near of her vera great beauty, and he is ready to meet her. So he is take round to ze rooms where she be—ze grand, *magnifique* apartments! But he do not see much of ze rooms affaire he look on her, for she is beautiful—she is divine! He lose his head right away."

"Well, ze young Monsieur Keeng he fall in love wiz ze Americane beauty, and she make heem believe she is in love wiz heem. Pah! She play heem for what money she can geet, and he tell her everyt'ing 'bout heemself. He t'ink she is one angel, but he is a fool."

The listening woman laughed, lightly.

"The woods are full of them," she declared, tossing the half-smoked cigarette into the urn,

to keep the first company. But she was restless and could not remain idle without something in her fingers, so she lighted another.

"You are exasperatingly slow in your manner of telling this story, Monsieur Mirabeau," she impatiently declared. "You make me fretful. Get a move on and come to the point."

The light in her eyes was shifting and unsteady now. She did not look at him steadily, as at first, although she occasionally shot him a keen glance.

"Well," the Frenchman continued, "ze young man would be all right eef he had not been lead on by ze woman—"

"That old plea makes me tired!" contemptuously exclaimed Mrs. Randolph. "The blame is always thrown upon the woman—never on the man!"

Mirabeau slightly shrugged his shoulders, but did not combat her assertion.

"All ze time ze woman and Monsieur Ferril zey plot to geet young Keeng out of ze way. When zat is done, Ferril can take hees place. Oh, madame, eet is a vera bold scheme! And zey do make eet work—*oui*. Ze woman lead Keeng to dreenk more zen evaire, and one night he dreenk so much he do not know notting at all.

"When he recovaire, he find heemself shut up in a dungeon—a place of stone undaire ze ground. Zere ees a guard, and when he ask how he come zere, ze guard say he have keel a man and be condemn to the place for life. He do not remembre anything of zat; ze last he remembre he was drinking in ze rooms of ze beautiful American lady he t'ink he love.

"Madame, I am not able to say what zis young man feel—I have not ze power to speak eet in ze American language. Eet was terrible! He suffaire ze great amount, and when he beat at ze stone and ze iron bar and call to see ze sun and ze open air, ze keepaire come and beat heem till he fall. Zen he do come mad and say he will keel ze keepaire; but how can he do zat when he have no way of get from ze dungeon?"

"In ze darkness of ze place where it be night all ze time, he plan to get out—to be free—to taste ze opaine air eef he have to die ze next minute. He do not know how long he is in ze dungeon, but eet seem like many year, and he woudaire eef he is not an old man wiz vera gray hair.

"One hundred time ze prisonaire go feel, feel, feel all ovaire ze stone of ze dungeon with his fingaires—feel of all ze stone and see eef one of zem is loose. One day he find one zat move undaire hees hand; zen he shed ze tears of joy.

"Madame, I will not drag out ze story by tell all ze time he take to do eet, and how eet was done, but ze young man deeg, deeg, deeg his way out. Ze guard nevaire find out what he is doin', teel one day when he try to get out of ze place. Zen he come *nez-a-nez* wiz ze keepaire who have beat him so. Ze keepaire give a great shout an' jump at heem, but Monsieur Keeng grab heem by ze t'roat—burl heem down—crush a knee into hees breast—hold heem zere teel he is dead!"

The Frenchman's manner was so savage and dramatic that the listener shuddered and sunk far back amid the cushions, staring up at Mirabeau, who had risen to his feet, illustrating the battle and its result by rapid gestures. He bent his knee, as if crushing it into the breast of the brutal but unlucky keeper, and crooked his sinewy fingers, as if they were closing on the man's windpipe and destroying his life.

The color had receded from the beautiful woman's face and left the pallor of fear.

Mirabeau went on, swiftly.

"How zat keepaire's eyes do steek out of hees head! Zey stare at ze prisoner who have keel heem, and Keeng run away. But wherevair he run it is night, and ze eyes stare at heem. He find ze open air, but eet is not enough—he is still choke. Aftaire time he come back to ze place—ze dungeon. And all ze time he see zem eyes stare at heem. He creep in ze dark of ze place and find ze body of ze dead where eet has come all cold. Zen he take eet on his shouldaire and carry it to a place where he can bury it in the forest. Aftaire that he breathe, and he see ze eyes stare at him not any more. Zen it is morning—ze bright, beautiful, sunshiny morning!"

"And now what shall I tell you, madame! Ah-a, leesten! Zen he do find out zat he have keel nobody at all—eet is all one wicked lie, lie, lie! He have not been condemn by law; but he have been shut up by ze ones he t'ink hees friends. Ze woman drug ze wine he dreenk! Oh, she is one beautiful she-dev-val!"

"A rather thrilling tale," confessed Mrs. Randolph, when he paused. "But I still fail to understand how it concerns me."

"I t'ink perhaps you know zat woman."

"I know her? Preposterous! What was her name?"

"In America she was call' Diamond Bess! Now can you say zat you do not know her?"

CHAPTER XXI.

MIRABEAU UNMASKS.

THE Frenchman almost hissed the question, bending forward, his eyes fastened on the face of his companion. If, however, he expected to

overwhelm her with confusion, he failed most disappointingly in his purpose.

She lifted her eyebrows and looked at him quizzically, the cigarette held between her fingertips, while a little ribbon of blue smoke curled upward from the lighted extremity. Whatever might be transpiring within her heart, outwardly she was cool as ice.

"I scarcely think I ever had the honor of knowing a person by the name of Diamond Bess," she replied, her voice steady, and well under control. "She must have been a sport to have such a name."

Mirabeau smiled, but she fancied there was something almost devilish in that smile. There was no mirth in it, and it seemed that behind the masking goggles his eyes were blazing.

"She was one woman dev-val!" he sibilated. Then he calmly resumed his seat.

"Are you searching for her, monsieur?" languidly inquired Mrs. Randolph.

"Perhap'. I will tell you zat lataire—when I have feenish ze story."

"When you have finished?"

"*Oui, madame.*"

"Then it is not done?"

He shook his head.

"Zere is more."

"And you wish me to bear the infliction? Oh, well, I suppose I might as well, as I have nothing else to take up my time."

"Zen you do not like ze story?"

"I did not say so."

"You hint so."

"Really! Well, perhaps I did. Still, I will confess your narration sounds like a chapter from a sensational novel."

"Eet is no novaile story—eet is ze trute."

"I did not mean to infer you were drawing the long-bow," she smiled; but there was an arching of her eyebrows, as if the words did not mean exactly what they expressed.

"Ze young Monsieur Keeng do steel live."

"He is fortunate."

"Zat is trute."

"He need not consider it necessary to take out a life-insurance policy for some time to come."

The Frenchman closed and unclosed his long fingers in a strange manner. It almost seemed as if those fingers itched to grasp the snowy throat of the woman, who reclined in a manner so unconcerned upon the soft cushions.

But Mirabeau noted one thing: She was watching him with hawk-like closeness, even while appearing indifferent to all about her, and he believed her more than half-prepared for any sudden move he might make.

It would not have surprised him had she flashed a knife or revolver on him.

The tiger appeared at ease, but he appreciated the presence of keen claws beneath a velvet exterior.

There was one mute testator to the fact that she was keenly on the alert. In her fingers the cigarette was being neglected, and the vanishing ribbon of smoke surely indicated, and in a few seconds more it would go out entirely.

Mirabeau's eyes took in all these things, even to the slightest, and her artificial calm did not delude him an iota.

"Zere is some of his enemy zat bettaire take out ze life-insurance policy," came forward from beneath that needle-pointed mustache. Somehow, his mustache and imperial seemed to give his face a devilish look just then, and every angle of his frame stood out offensively.

"Then I presume he has sworn a solemn swear to have revenge?" almost sneered the woman.

"He have take ze oath," acknowledged the Frenchman.

"Your story grows still more novelish in its nature. This young King should be dubbed the Modern Monte Cristo."

"He might be call zat, eef only he have ze plenty of money. Eef he have zat, he wait his time to do ze work of vengeance; but now he have resolve to crush zose zat do heem wrong—crush zem queek!"

"That's the stuff—jump 'em! I don't blame him."

"Well, I weel fineesh ze story. Ze young monsieur find ze way to foltaire zem zat do heem ze vera great wrong—he track zem to America—he find zem in New York."

"Now you are bringing the romance right home to us."

"Yes, he find zem here—he find ze false friend zat look like heem. Ah, madame, what you t'ink? Zat friend is take ze place of young Monsieur Keeng—he go by zat name—live wiz ze young man fazare—deceive zem all."

Mrs. Randolph showed the tips of her milky teeth in an odd smile.

"It grows worse and worse!" she sighed, with an open attempt at incredulity.

"You do not believe?"

"Oh, how could such a thing be possible?"

"Did I not say zey look vera much alike?"

"Yes; but think of deceiving his father!"

"You say eet is impossible?"

"It seems so."

"It was done, madame."

"Oh, well—let that pass. Go on."

"You want to know ze rest?"

"I might as well accept the whole infliction, having stood it thus far."

She was losing some of her polished courtesy, but that fact did not disturb the Frenchman—in truth, it rather pleased him.

"Monsieur Keeng set about finding all about all ze impostaire. Eet take a leetaile time, but he do zat—he find out many t'ing, madame."

"But how are you interested in the case?"

"You do not understand zat?"

"I must confess I do not."

"Well, you shall—lataire."

She made a careless gesture with her hand, and, for the first time, noticed the extinguished cigarette in her fingers. There was the faintest lifting of her eyebrows, and then she sent it to keep the company of its comrades in the urn. She did not light another.

For a few seconds, neither man or woman spoke. She regarded him with inquiry in her eyes.

"Madame," said Mirabeau, at length, "in zis story I have use some deception."

"How could you help it?"

"Ah?"

"You are a Frenchman."

"Now your words do have ze sting; littaille while ago, zey be like honey."

"Too much sweet is nauseating."

"*Oui*. Well, I give ze false name for ze young man."

"So?"

"Hees right name is not Keeng."

"What, then?"

"Prince."

"A grade lower."

She was cool as an icicle.

"Did you evaire hear of heem?"

"Can't say."

"You know somebody by zat name?"

"I have known several people by the name of Prince."

"You know ze one I mean?"

"Is that so? What is his most convenient handle?"

"What you mean by zat?"

"What is his first name?"

"Paul."

"Not Paul, son of Hanson Prince, the diamond merchant?"

"*Oui*."

"Say!"

"What?"

"Come off!"

"I do not understand?"

"You do not expect me to take any stock in this fairy story, do you?"

"Don't you believe?"

"That Paul Prince is an impostor—no! Look here, Monsieur Mirabeau, it is plain somebody has been filling you with guff, and I advise you to go punch their heads. I have patiently listened to your wild tale, although I fully understood how ridiculously improbable—not to say impossible—it all was; but now I feel it my duty to give you a tip. If you value your liberty, do not try to work that on any one else."

She had straightened up and was looking him straight in the eyes, all her languor vanished. She seemed in sober earnest, but the man looked on it all as a square bluff. He knew the woman to whom he was talking far better than she dreamed.

"I am glad to see you have taken a new turn, madame," he bowed, mockingly, his manner bringing more color to her cheeks. "I see ze time have come to talk straight. Eet is unpleasant, but it have to be done. Zis Paul Prince is one impostaire, and you know it!"

He flung the final words fairly in her teeth.

Like a flash, the woman was on her feet.

"You insulting wretch!" she cried, her queenly head thrown back and her eyes blazing. "Do you dare—"

"I dare most anyt'ink, Diamond Bess," was the calm retort.

He saw she had expected that, for she was not staggered.

"I am beginning to understand you," she declared, as if she just comprehended what he was driving at. "You mean that I—I am this adventuress of whom you have told!"

Mirabeau bowed, taking good care to keep his eyes fastened upon her, for he did not wish to be caught at an advantage by one so desperate as he now believed she was.

"Zat is what I mean, madame."

And then she turned upon him a perfect torrent of Billingsgate—a flood that well might have overwhelmed him, had he not been expecting just such an outbreak. She did not hesitate to speak anything that came into her mind, and her language overflowed with menace and malison.

Through it all he remained calmly watching her, making no attempt to interrupt or check her, knowing it were best to let her fury exhaust itself. His time would come then, and he proposed to make the best of it.

At length, when she paused for breath, he quietly said:

"I have come here for the purpose of securing your assistance in entrapping Paul Prince. You will aid me in—"

"I will aid you in nothing!" she almost screamed. "Go—get out of these rooms!"

He did not stir.

"You had better be calm," said the man, and she was so excited she did not notice he had suddenly dropped his accent. "I have a grip on you, my lady, that you cannot shake. If you raise a row, it will be the worse for you. In fact, you dare not do such a foolish thing."

"Dare not? Ha! we'll see!"

She made a move to strike the bell, but his long fingers closed like bands of steel on her delicate wrist.

"Wait a bit," he advised. "Let me tell you something."

"I will not listen! Let go!"

She clinched the free hand and struck straight at his face with the hard little fist, but the blow was neatly stopped, and she found both wrists held secure.

"If you scream, I will turn you over to the police!" came hissing from beneath that pointed mustache.

Something in his manner, more than in his words, silenced her. She stood like stone, staring at him—staring, staring! All the blood left her face and her flesh grew cold. In her bosom, her heart was like a stone.

"Now you are coming to your senses," he nodded.

"You," she gasped—"you are not a Frenchman! Your voice—I have heard it before! But your face—no, no, no!"

Of a sudden he released her wrists and removed the masking goggles from his eyes.

She staggered back, holding up both hands, as she gasped:

"Those eyes—God! They are his! Am I going mad? You—you are—"

With a swift movement, he removed the mustache and imperial, thus showing they were false.

"Now you must surely know me, Diamond Bess!"

"My God! It is Paul Prince!" she panted, chokingly.

CHAPTER XXII.

AT THE MERCY OF FIENDS.

ALL the beautiful woman's strength and nerve left her, and she sunk shuddering, panting, sobbing on the couch from which she had risen in fury. All along she had been regarding the man as one of the famous ferrets from the gay metropolis of France, and she had steeled herself to meet any charge such a character might make; but never for one instant had she fancied he was the true Paul Prince in disguise.

He smiled as he came close and looked down upon her. There was no pity in that smile—it was full of satisfaction and triumph. At one blow he had flung her prostrate—crushed her.

In many ways the man resembled the false Paul Prince, but the confinement and horror through which he had passed had made his face marble-like and stern, while his eyes cut like keen swords.

She did not dare look up at him, though she knew he was there at her side; and for a time, the only sounds heard in the room came convulsively from her lips.

At length, he touched her on the shoulder, causing her to shrink from him.

"Come, come!" he said, and his voice was cold and stern. "I am surprised at your lack of nerve. A woman of your character should have the face to meet anything, and surely this will be nothing worse than you have already endured—a little confinement under guard."

She caught her breath convulsively.

"Oh, no!" she whispered—"my God, no!"

"Criminals should always be ready to face the penalty for their misdeeds."

"Criminals—"

"Yes. You need not cringe at the word, for such you are, as you know."

"Mercy!"

"Oh-o! You begin to beg as quick as this! Well, my astonishment increases. Did you have any mercy on me?"

"They forced me into it—honestly, truly!—I will swear to it!"

He made a gesture of disgust, and cried, scornfully:

"Pah! You would swear to anything to save yourself! I know you for what you really are! But there is one thing I do not understand—and that is how God could make such a beautiful body and place within it so vile a heart."

She crouched and covered, as if his hard words were cruel blows on her defenseless shoulders; she buried her face amid the cushions and moaned like a wounded thing.

"Look here, Diamond Bess," said Paul Prince, after he had watched her for a few moments, "I came here for a purpose, and I have already wasted too much time. Straighten up here and let me talk to you."

She did not obey.

"You will not, eh? Then shall I leave you long enough to secure a policeman on the corner and let him serve a warrant I have in my pocket?"

"No, no! Don't do that, Paul—don't! Won't

you believe me when I tell you they forced me into this? You *must* believe! I did not want to do it, but they said there was any amount of money in it—"

"And you were ready to sell your soul for money! Forced you! Bosh! It was the money that lured you!"

"Oh, I have regretted— I have dreamed of you in the night! They told me you were dead. Only a short time ago did Ferril confess you still lived—a prisoner in France. Then came the word that you and the keeper had disappeared. I was for fleeing at once, but Ferril would not listen to it. He and Rockvelt had some kind of a scheme to baffle you, should you appear in New York—I know not what it was. They told me to be brave, no matter what happened."

The wronged man smiled in his cold manner.

"So they would try to baffle me? Well, they shall find I am no longer a foolish boy. What do I not owe to those devils! They shall feel the weight of my wrath! I will crush them like squirming snakes beneath my feet!"

His words were savage enough, but they were uttered in a steady and even tone of voice that caused the listening woman to shudder.

Suddenly she flung herself at his feet, clasping his knees with her round arms.

"Oh, Paul!" she entreated—"spare me! I will do anything, if you will spare me! I have been behind the bars once; it will be my death to go there again!"

"Is there any reason why I should spare you? But for you, they could not have brought about the trick—they would not have succeeded in their hellish work. So, in fact, I owe everything to you."

"You are cruel, cruel! Have I not told you I would do anything? I have longed to reform and lead a different life, a thing that will be impossible, if you fling this horrible thing upon me."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I dare not believe you."

"Oh, you *must*!"

"I know your treacherous nature too well. You might turn on these men now, in order to save yourself, but, should the opportunity offer, you would betray me to them."

"You are wrong—I would not do that! I truly would not! With them out of the way, I might begin life over again. I would go far from New York—I would go where I was not known. But, as long as they can keep a grip on me, it is impossible for me to do this." Now she turned her face up to him, for the first time since learning who he really was, and her fair cheeks were wet with tears.

"I am ready to serve you, Paul—I will be your slave—I will do anything you ask! I will aid you in entrapping Ferril Costagan and Bry Rockvelt, and I will testify against them. Then I will go far, far from this country, where you will never see or hear of me again. What more can you ask? Can't you see—can't you understand how truly penitent I really am?"

He reached down and firmly unclasped her hands.

"If you hope for mercy from me, do not touch me again!" were the icy words he spoke. "Your touch is pollution, and I cannot endure it! Sit down there."

He pointed to a chair, and she crept to it on her knees, really appearing like the slave that grovels at its master's feet. She leaned against it, but did not attempt to rise and sit in it.

He sat down facing her, with his back toward the *portieres*. He looked steadily at her, but her drooping eyes were fastened on the carpet, while now and then a tear ran down her cheek. The sight of those tears angered him, for he regarded them as sure indication of shallow feeling. Had she really experienced the regret and sorrow she professed, her feelings would have been too deeply stirred for tears. But then, shrewd in many ways though she was, could she be regarded as other than a shallow creature whom fortune had cast adrift on the tossing sea of iniquity?

"If you are truly in earnest, woman," he deliberately said, "there is a possible chance for you."

Her face brightened a bit.

"That is all I ask—a bare chance."

"What guaranty have I you will not play double?"

"My word—"

"Which I know is worthless. It must be more than that."

"My desire to reform."

"I doubt if women of your sort ever reform."

"Then my horror of imprisonment."

"Well, that is something, surely."

For a moment his keen eyes were fastened on the floor, and he seemed considering the situation. Had he been watching her then, he might have seen her start and bite her lips, while she looked past him at the *portieres*, which were slightly astir. But when his eyes rested on her face again, he saw nothing to excite suspicion—nothing to warn him of impending peril. What had she seen behind the *portieres*?

For a moment they had parted, and the face of the false Paul Prince appeared. The villain

pressed a finger to his lips, and she understood the meaning of the signal.

Then, when the rightful Paul began to speak again, the curtains were softly parted, and, like a cat, Ferril Costagan entered the room.

In his hand was the weapon of the midnight footpad—the sandbag.

Softly, cautiously, inch by inch, the murderous wretch stole toward the unconscious man. In Costagan's eyes gleamed a terrible look—a look that told of red intent in his heart.

Paul Prince was in deadly and terrible peril!

The woman did not dare to look toward the creeping man, lest she betray the fact of his presence, and so she kept her eyes on the floor. Her heart was throbbing wildly and her bosom heaving, but her emotion seemed the natural result of what she had just passed through.

The man with the sandbag made no sound. His footfalls on the soft carpet were perfectly noiseless, and he came close behind Prince without being detected.

The sandbag was raised!

Was it instinct—an undefinable something—that caused the menaced one to stir and partially turn?

Too late!

Down came the sandbag!

Forward on his feet the unfortunate one was hurled, fairly knocked senseless by a single blow.

Like a tiger, Costagan flung himself upon the prostrate man, ready to use the weapon again, if necessary, but a second blow was not needed.

"Ah-a!" he snarled, as he knelt on the body of his victim. "That fixes the fool till I can get a knife into his throat!"

The woman caught his arm.

"Not here, not here!" she panted. "Do not kill him here!"

He turned on her, savagely.

"Curse you!" he grated. "You would have betrayed us!"

"Oh, no!" she boldly protested. "I was doing my best to make him believe so, but I was only playing for a little time. I would have warned you, and then we all would have escaped. That is straight."

"Well, I suppose I shall have to believe you, though it did look as if you had turned. There is no need of our leaving New York now. We will stay and play out the game, for Paul Prince is in our power, and to-night he dies! His body will be forever hidden from mortal eyes! Don't shudder, you fool! It is the only course for us now, and Heaven above shall not defeat us!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

GETTING INTO MIKE DOLBY'S.

Two days passed, and Double-voice Dan heard nothing from "Count Fabian Mirabeau." The detective could not understand the odd "Frenchman's" silence.

Dan had fancied the "count" a man who might prove of value to him, although something led him to believe his strange friend was not exactly what he appeared on the surface.

Dan had a pair of very keen eyes, and, while Mirabeau sat before him in the little office, those eyes had discovered the finely-waxed mustache and imperial were false.

But the detective had thought best to keep silent till the other saw fit to reveal the "lay" he was on, feeling satisfied it was in some way connected with his own work. The disguised man had said enough to excite this thought in the mind of the famous ventriloquist ferret.

For a bit, Dan had fancied the man might be a detective, but further observation had caused him to abandon the idea, as Mirabeau's manner was not that of the trained rogue-catcher. Had he been such, it would have been folly for him to have done anything to arouse Dan's curiosity.

Another thing that displeased Downing was the complete disappearance of Bry Rockvelt. The black-mustached sport had vanished as if swallowed by the earth.

This, however, was not difficult to understand. Rockvelt undoubtedly considered it a very healthy thing for him to lay low about then, considering the result of the three battles—on the street, in the tenement, and on the roof.

It was possible the gambler feared immediate arrest, should he show himself.

But Dan knew Rockvelt to be a man of considerable nerve and cheek, and it was pretty certain he would not long remain hidden. He would appear around his old haunts, and, if arrested, would try a "stand-off bluff." He would disclaim all knowledge of the girl, defying Dan to produce proof.

As the girl had also disappeared, this would be something of a difficult nature.

What had become of the fair unknown?

Without doubt, she was still in the power of her enemies, for Dan had begun to look on Paul Prince as a full-fledged rascal. The detective now saw that, instead of being an unconscious victim of Rockvelt and Diamond Bess, the Plunger was willingly vicious. None the less might he be their victim, but his eyes were open to the character of his associates, and he did not escape them.

Scrimpy had seen Paul with the girl—had seen her carried away by the fellow. As Paul and

Rockvelt were on the best of terms, it was plain that the young lady had again fallen into the grip of the black-mustached sport.

Who was she?

Vira Selwick!

The more Dan thought of that, the firmer became his conviction that the girl was the missing sweetheart of the youthful Plunger. This train of thought led him to wondering why Rockvelt could wish to keep her a captive. She was not an heiress, and so he could not be expecting ransom-money.

But, was Rockvelt at the bottom of it? It was possible he was simply doing the work of another, although it was not like the man to be used as a tool. He was the kind that usually uses others to serve a purpose.

Then the detective fancied he saw a ray of light. Paul Prince was at the bottom of this particular trick, having a reason why he wished Vira Selwick out of the way. Rockvelt had assisted the young man for some reason—probably to obtain a still stronger hold on the diamond merchant's son.

The more he regarded the matter in that light the more inclined he became to believe he had hit on a possible solution. If so, Paul Prince had fallen to a level from which there was no hope of lifting him. It would be simply impossible to save the young man from the clutches of those whom his father believed dragging him down.

"The best thing for him will be a term of years," muttered Dan.

Just then Scrimpy came in and flung himself into a chair, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Well, Scrimps?"

"Naw it hain't, nuther!"

The gamin replied in a tone of voice that plainly indicated his disgust.

"What's the matter?"

"Lots."

"Give it to us."

"Dat bloke don't give a feller a show."

"Prince?"

"Yes, der Plunger."

"What do you mean?"

"He must have fined der Sunday School."

"What makes you think that?"

"He's so blessed good all ter oncet."

"Then you have not been able to work him?"

"Not ter any great extent. He's got so he jest won't be worked. He don't go ter none of der old places ner do northin' 'at'll give me a show."

"Which shows our game has taken the alarm."

"I sh'ud suss so!"

The gamin's disgust was so great he was scarcely civil. He tilted back a chair and placed his feet against the wall, clasping his hands behind his head, and staring at the ceiling, while he scowled in a manner that made his entire face look like a mass of knots.

Something like the ghost of a smile flitted across the face of the detective.

"This all comes in the business," said Dan.

"Den I t'ink I'll throw up me commission."

"All right; if you're getting discouraged, the sooner you throw it up the better."

"Who's gittin' discouraged?" snapped the boy.

"I'm all right!"

"Then what are you kicking about?"

"I was boun' ter have de furst kick," was the reply, something like a sly twinkle appearing in the lad's blue eyes. "I lowed you'd kick like a mule w'en I told yer I hadn't done a t'ing dat counted, an' so—"

Dan laughed.

"And so you kicked first? Well, you are a good one. Do you think the Plunger tumbled to it that you were spotting him?"

"I don't t'ink so," was the slow answer; "an' still it's jest bloomin' funny how he acted."

Then Dan asked for a full account of Paul's movements, which Scrimpy gave in his odd manner. The detective listened attentively, nodding slightly now and then. When it was all over, Dan said:

"This settles it."

"Settles w'at?"

"A point I have been doubtful on."

"Which is dat?"

"About Paul's honesty."

"Now w'at d'yer t'ink?"

"He's crooked to the core! I begin to believe he is about as bad as Rockvelt."

"Boss, you's struck der right string!" cried the young assistant. "Dis goody-good racket is all put on."

"And Paul Prince would not put on anything of the kind if he was not a rascal at heart. Otherwise, he would be highly indignant at the thought of being shadowed and suspected, and he would simply make a big row. He has betrayed his duplicity."

"Well, I dunno w'at dat is, but I reckon he's crooked as sin."

"Scrimps, we will try a different trick."

"Spread it."

"I will shadow Prince."

"An' I?"

"You can hunt for Rockvelt, Count Mirabeau, the girl—anybody or anything you think best."

Scrimpy slapped his thigh.

"Dat suits me! Now I'll do somet'ing, youse bet! I can't do ser well w'en I'm tied down ter jest one t'ing. I wants lots of room ter spread in. See!"

It was finally arranged, and Dan took to shadowing Paul, having disguised himself as an English laborer.

It seemed probable Paul had suspected Scrimpy, for, as soon as the boy ceased shadowing him, he changed his manner of clinging to the most respectable streets, and, when he seemed sure he was no longer dogged, he "made a break."

But Double-voice Dan was on his trail, and the cab that took Paul toward the East Side was followed by an open wagon, in the bottom of which lay the detective, covered by a mass of blankets. He had paid the driver well to keep in sight of the cab, knowing the Plunger would not suspect an open wagon, where he might take the alarm if followed by another cab.

Paul was conveyed to Avenue A and dropped on a corner, where he paid and dismissed cabby.

Dan instantly suspected where the man was going.

"Into Mike Dolby's, or I'm a fool!" thought the shadow. "That is a tough hole—a retreat for thieves and thugs, but I have been there once, and I will go again, if necessary. It is a wonder to me the police allow such a place to exist, for they surely know of its existence."

At the proper time, Dan dropped from the wagon, the driver being already paid, and followed Paul. He staggered slightly as he made his way along, and muttered to himself, as if vainly trying to sing a song.

As he had suspected, the Plunger turned into the narrow opening that led to Dead Cat Alley, on which was situated Mike Dolby's place.

The detective knew better than to hesitate about following him in there, if he intended going there at all, for hesitation would arouse suspicion, so he promptly staggered into the alley. He hoarsely gurgled a low drinking song—or snatches of it—as he reeled down the dark passage between the sagging walls.

In a black nook he saw a figure he knew was that of the man he was following, but in no way did he betray the fact that he had made such a discovery. He continued right along about his business, occasionally stumbling and growling at the darkness.

When Dolby's door was reached, he pushed it open and entered the close and foul-smelling passage. It was dark as a pocket there, but he felt his way along till, at a turn, he saw a light shining from beneath a door and heard loud voices and coarse laughter.

There he halted a moment, wondering if Paul would follow or would be frightened away by the passage of an apparently drunken man.

As he leaned against the wall, the door further on was flung open, allowing a flood of light to fall on the opposite wall, and also permitting the escape into the passage of a host of unnamable smells, the most pronounced being that of sour beer.

Then the black form of a man blocked the doorway, a huge cigar in his mouth. He paused to look back and growl, his voice like the snarl of a bull-dog:

"If I runs onter him ter-night, I'll cut his heart out! That's w'at I'll do!"

And he was plainly a person who would not hesitate at any crime, if aroused.

Then the burly tough closed the door, and Dan was alone with him in the dark passage, where two men could not pass without touching each other.

The detective started toward the door, stumbled slightly, then began to rave at the darkness of the place.

"Blame it all, why don't yer leave hopen ther bloody door?" he growled. "W'y don't they 'ave a light in hany place like this? Hi never saw such a 'owling 'eathenish country!"

Then he felt a hand grasp his shoulder.

"Who in blazes are you?" demanded the man with the cigar, the end of which glowed redly in the blackness of the place.

"Hi, hi!" cried Dan, as if in great alarm. "Leggo, you bloomin' bloke! Hi ham not bon your section! Why don't yer show a man ther door?"

"Ob, you want ther door, do yer? Well, you shall have it, and you may find it hot on t'other side."

With that, the owner of the cigar dragged Dan to the door, kicked it open and gave the disguised ferret a shove that caused him to stagger into the room and fall in a heap near the middle of the floor.

"Here's somethin' I found outside, tryin' ter find it's way in," explained the tough with the cigar. Then he closed the door and was gone.

"What th' bloody blue blazes is it?" roared a voice, and a red-whiskered man came over the bar with a single bound, landing where he could obtain a fair view of Dan. There he placed his hands on his hips and stared at the detective.

Dan recognized the fellow as the proprietor of the place, Mike Dolby, a bad man with a record. He was certainly a tough-looking specimen, being a typical Irish ruffian, square-jawed, ferocious and evil-eyed. His sleeves were

rolled above the elbows, exposing a pair of brawny red forearms.

The crowd within the place was composed of fit associates for the brutal-appearing barkeeper and proprietor. They were of the worst class, nearly all of whom had served time and were well known to the police.

"Well, now, who th' roarin' devil are you?" demanded Dolby, his red hair bristling and his small eyes getting a greenish tinge.

"An honest Henglishman sir," gurgled Dan, as he laboriously struggled to his feet. "Hi ham not in the 'abit hof being used like a dog! Hiif Hi 'ad not been drinkin', Hi'd follow that bloomin' bloke hand knock the 'ead hof him!"

At this a roar of laughter went up.

"Hear him!" shouted one—"hear him say he'd knock the head off Slugger Nubbs!"

Every one seemed to regard this as a very funny thing.

"Well, Hi ham the lad as can do that," asserted Dan, his tongue seeming very thick. "Hi'd 'ave you hunderstand Hi 'ave a reputation in the Hold Country—Hi belong to the P. R." And then he struck an attitude.

The mirth of the gang did not abate, but Mike Dolby caught the detective by the arm.

"Will yez be afther tellin' what yer want about here?" he snapped. "How did th' loikes av yer come in that entbry?"

"Git away hof!" cried Dan, making what seemed a drunken attempt at dignity. "Hi was put hon by a fellow called Battery Ben. 'E knowed me in Hengland."

"Who be yez?"

"Hi'm Lunnon Bob," asserted Dan, naming a famous English crook.

Instantly there was a show of respect on the part of the proprietor and the crowd, many of whom had heard of "Lunnon Bob." The detective added:

"Hi'm on an 'oly tear, mates, so step hup to ther bar hand 'ave somethin' with me."

It was amazing with what promptness the invitation was accepted by those present.

Just as the crowd ranged along the front of the bar, the door opened and Paul Prince entered.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GARROTED.

"COME hup, mate!" cried Dan, thickly—"come hup hand take a drink with Lunnon Bob!"

Paul glanced keenly around the room, as if searching for some one he did not see, then he came up to the bar, looking sharply at the disguised detective.

"Who's the last-comer here?" he asked of Dolby.

The proprietor pointed out the ferret, and again Paul regarded him suspiciously.

"Got throwed bin, too!" thickly gurgled the detective, not appearing to notice the Plunger's scrutiny. "Didn't 'ave 'alf a show! Hit is not fair to take hany man bin such a way."

Meantime, the red-headed Irishman was serving his customers such drinks as they called for. Dan took whisky, but he had not the least idea of swallowing the poison stuff, being magician enough to secretly dispose of it without allowing a drop to get into his stomach.

Paul Prince also took whisky, and Dan observed he dashed off the drink at a single gulp.

"He may have taken care of his health up to the present time," thought the ferret, "but he won't be able to drink a great deal of that stuff and keep it. The honest color in his cheeks will give place to a rum-flush. He is well on the way to Satan's kingdom, else he would never frequent such a place as this, and it is plain he is known here."

Dan made himself thoroughly at home, and was soon on easy terms with several of the loungers about the place—fellows with not a single dime in their pockets and eager to "work" anybody for a drink.

The detective hinted at many shady things and gave the impression that he had just done a job that "panned out" well. He bore out this impression by spending money freely at the bar. With each passing moment, he apparently grew more intoxicated, although he kept his legs in pretty fair shape.

Paul pretended to disregard Dan, after that first searching scrutiny, but the detective was aware that the Plunger was still watching him.

"He knows I am the only one who could have followed him here," thought Dan. "Well, if he traps me into betraying myself he will do better than I think."

After a time, Paul approached the detective.

"You say you are Lunnon Bob?" he questioned.

"That's w'at Hi ham, mate."

"I have heard of you."

Dan pretended to swell with pride.

"Hi think likely, sir."

"But I never heard anything to your credit."

Then the detective clinched his hands, rounded his shoulders, thrust forward his neck, glaring sideways at Paul, as he snarled:

"What's that Hi 'ear? Never 'eard hanythink to my credit? The 'oly Dutch you never! Didn't you 'ear 'ow Hi knifed Sucker Johnny w'en ther blawsted bloke blowed on ther 'Eadland Gang?"

What d'ye call that, sir? Hif that hisn't to my credit, Hi'd like to 've yer tell what'd be!"

Paul showed his perfect teeth in a faint smile. "It's all in the way of looking at these things," he confessed. "Of course that little job gave you a reputatiou—"

"Git hout! Hi 'ad me reputation before that! Hall Hi did was sustain hit, mate."

"Well, you sustained it in a satisfactory manner."

"Hit was satisfactory to me hand the rest hof the gang, but Hi do not think Sucker Johnny found hany satisfaction hin hit."

"Likely not. How did you happen to cross the pond?"

"Hit was getting a little too 'ot hover there."

"Ah, I see."

"Ave a drink with me, mate?"

"No, I guess not, if you don't mind. I am not drinking much to-night."

Dan looked Paul over carefully.

"Well, you're a pretty bird!" he said, a trace of derision in his husky voice. "'Ow do they 'appen to 'ave you haround 'ere?"

The Plunger laughed, good-naturedly.

"Oh, I'm in with the boys," he assured.

"Hi don't bunderstand hit, hall the same," gurgled Dan. "Guess you 'ad better av a drink with me."

Paul hesitated.

"Then come into the back room," he said, after a moment of thought. "I have a proposal to make to you."

"What kind hof a proposal?"

"Something I do not care to talk about here."

"Ho!"

"Will you come?"

"Hi shouldn't wonder."

Dan knew it might be a trap, but he was not going to arouse suspicion by refusing. He would keep his hands ready to grasp his revolver, and they would have a lively time in downing him, if he had anything like a fair show.

Paul led the way toward the back room, having received permission from Dolby and left an order at the bar. Dan followed, staggering a little.

The bare back room was lighted in a very unsatisfactory manner, but the keen eyes of the detective were able to search it thoroughly. He saw nothing of a suspicious nature, but his watchfulness was not allayed in the least. When Paul prepared to sit down at a table in such a manner that his back would be toward the wall and Dan—providing he took the opposite seat—would have his back toward the door, the ferret fancied he saw a purpose underlying the disposition of situations.

Dan did not hesitate about acting. He promptly staggered forward and half-fell into the chair near the wall, mumbling the apology of a drunken man.

"Well, you are full to the chin now!" exclaimed Paul. "I reckon it's no good to talk business with you."

"Hi'm all right, mate," asserted Dan, plainly struggling to appear as sober as possible. "Hi never get down. My brain is clear henough; the stuff his ball hin my legs."

Dolby's assistant came in with whisky and glasses, and Paul sat down with his back to the door. Dan promptly reached for the bottle of whisky, but was apparently obliged to make three grasps before he secured it. His hand was so unsteady he spilled more than he turned into the glass.

Paul turned out a small amount, and they touched glasses.

"Here's to success," said the Plunger, in a significant manner. "Drink it down and don't let it choke you."

Dan noticed the peculiar accent on the word "choke," and, as he leaned against the wall, something fell before his eyes. Then he felt a cold cord, like the sinuous coil of a serpent, close around his throat with a deadly force and his head was held hard against the partition.

Instantly Double-voice Dan knew what had happened—knew he was trapped, despite his vigilance!

Around his neck had closed the deadly cord of the strangler!

He was being garroted!

He tried to break away—to cry out—to tear the noose from his throat.

In vain!

He was held there, helpless as a child, while the hellish cord robbed him of his breath—his life!

Was he to die thus tamely?

In his ears sounded a distant roaring that grew louder and louder, like the terrible warning note of an approaching avalanche. Colored lights began to flash before his eyes, like the bursting of rockets.

Then, for a single instant, his brain cleared and he saw the devilish, smiling face of the man on the opposite side of the table—the man who was calmly watching him strangle to death.

The sight filled him with a fury unbounded. His strength was swiftly ebbing, but he thought of the revolver in his pocket and his hand sought and found it.

Now the face that wore the devilish smile was dancing here and there before him. The revol-

ver was in his grasp, but would he be able to hit the owner of that face with the single shot his strength would allow him to fire?

He lifted the revolver in his nerveless fingers, and away in the vague distance he seemed to hear a cry of fear.

Then he pressed the trigger.

A burst of flame and a terrific explosion followed.

It seemed as if all the world had been sent hurtling through boundless space, and the light of the living sun was forever blotted out.

Darkness—unconsciousness—was it death?

CHAPTER XXV.

RATS!

No!

The daring detective's time had not come.

After a while he seemed dreaming. He fancied he was wandering amid sweet fields and pleasant woodlands, but from every hand rose a perfume that was dense and choking. He could not obtain a breath of pure and scentless atmosphere no matter how hard he strove.

In the midst of all the beauty of nature was the horror of sweet suffocation.

Then he felt a dull pain. At first he could not locate it—could not tell in what part of his body it was; but gradually he realized it was in his throat and his temples. He wondered what caused it, and up in his imagination arose the smiling face of the human devil who had sat on the opposite side of the table while Dan was being slowly strangled to death.

How he hated that face!

He realized he hated it with all the intensity of his nature, and then he fell to wondering if his bullet had been wasted. He remembered pressing the trigger and hearing the fearful explosion—then all was a blank.

Had he killed Paul Prince?

He hoped so.

These thoughts came to him before he was fully conscious of his surroundings, and then he commenced to wonder where he was. At first he was filled with the belief that he was really dead, but it only took a short time to convince him that was folly, for he was skeptical about dead men having the ability to think and reason.

No, he was not dead, but he wondered why not—why had he been spared?

That was a question to which there seemed no ready answer.

After a while, he realized he was recumbent on the cold ground and in blank darkness, save for a single flickering point of light. The place was damp and the air close and unwholesome. He fancied he was in a cellar.

Where?

In vain he asked himself the question. And he uselessly wondered why he had been spared at all.

Why hadn't his foes finished him when he was in their power and unconscious from strangulation?

He could hear the blood rushing through his head, as if it had not settled down to its accustomed regularity of flow after being checked by the garroter's cord.

He looked at the little point of light, and, after a while, he saw it was flanked by a grinning yellow skull.

The sight did not awaken fear in the breast of the helpless man.

Instead of that, it made him angry.

"The fools!" he thought. "Would they frighten me by such a silly trick? Bah!"

He would not have been alarmed had he seen a whole row of skeletons, instead of one harmless skull.

How long Dan lay there on the dank ground he was unable to estimate. He struggled at the bonds that held him, but they would not give.

He was unable to release himself.

"If I only could," he murmured, "I could meet them barehanded. I only ask half a show! What a fool I was to be trapped in such a way! Am I losing my skill that I allow men like Paul Prince to deceive me?"

He did not yet understand what a desperate and crafty rascal the Plunger was.

Dan had been in tight places before and come out alive, and he was not the man to give up hope—not by lary means. He would hope as long as he could draw a breath.

He wondered why his foes did not come, but, finally, he began to believe they had left him there to die. It was not a pleasant thing to contemplate—not at all.

Hark! What was that?

A squeaking in the darkness!

He knew what that meant, and he shuddered.

There were rats near at hand!

"I am not quite ready to be chewed up by rats," he growled. "If I must die, why die it is; but spare me from rats!"

He peered into the darkness and saw several tiny specks of light that moved here and there and vanished now and then. He knew the spots of light were the glowing eyes of the rats.

Then he fell to wondering why they had not attacked him before this, and he finally reasoned that he could not have been alone in the cellar very long. Probably the time had seemed much longer than it really was, and, perhaps, the men

who brought him there had barely left him when he recovered consciousness.

He waited for the rats to come nearer, but, for some unknown reason, they were in no haste to do so. He could not understand this at all, for he well understood the natural fierceness of the sewer vermin when they found a victim that was helpless.

Having recovered much of his strength, he fell to twisting at his bonds, only to finally give over in despair.

"They took good care to make me fast," he half-laughed, and his voice sounded hollow and ghostly.

He no longer had a single doubt about the utter vileness of Paul Prince. There was no such a thing as redemption for the old diamond merchant's son. Already had Paul descended the slope of sin and crime till it was too late for him to ever recover lost ground.

"Whatever becomes of me," thought the helpless ferret, "Paul Prince will end his days in prison or in the electric chair. I now see he is thoroughly bad—rotten to the core."

He heard the rustle of light feet and discovered the sparks of light were nearer.

The rats were slowly approaching!

"It is only a matter of time," Dan mentally observed. "I suppose I shall have to become provender for the rodents!"

He lay quiet still and watched and calculated on their approach. It was a horrible thing to think of, but it gave his mind some employment, and that seemed necessary just then.

Slowly, bit by bit, the creatures came toward their intended prey. At times there would be a commotion in their ranks, and they would scatter at one side, squeaking sharply; but in a short space they would fully recover all ground lost in such panics.

Finally, Dan felt one brush against him, and a few seconds later, one ran across his legs.

They were all around him now, and he wondered if they would make a combined onslaught or would send one of their number to make an attack to ascertain what the result would be.

Of a sudden, his nerves became strained to such a tension that he could keep quiet no longer, and he rolled over and over, causing the rats to flee squealing into the deeper darkness. When they were gone, he rolled back to his former position.

They had not deserted him, for he could see their little eyes shining in the blackness all around, and he knew they would come back again.

He discovered something that froze his blood for an instant.

The tiny light was going out.

With each passing moment it was growing dimmer, and in a short time it would fail entirely.

Then he would be alone in the horrible darkness of the dank cellar—alone with hundreds of rats!

Again the filthy rodents were coming toward him, creeping, crawling, coming!

He made another appalling discovery.

His nerve was failing!

"My God!" he grated, grinding his strong teeth. "Must I die like a coward, as well as like a helpless dog? Why can't I die in a manly fashion?"

It was a position of unutterable and indescribable horror.

And now fancy took up the assault on the helpless detective, for he began to see bright lights floating around in the air above him. Strangely enough, the lights did not illumine the cellar, but he seemed to feel sure they were there.

In the midst of the lights would appear the grinning face of Paul Prince, but when he looked at it closely, it would vanish from that particular spot, only to reappear at another.

Dan groaned.

"I fear I shall become a raving maniac!" he gasped. "In a little while, if this thing keeps on, I shall begin to scream. That is something I do not want to do, for my foes may be listening, and I would not have them dream I am terrified."

But the nerve of the bravest man might have faltered in such a position.

Back came the rats!

Dan had been watching the lights which were sailing about in the air, and he had almost forgotten his tiny enemies till they were swarming all about him.

One ran across his face!

Involuntarily, he uttered a cry of angry horror and disgust.

At the same instant, the light of the candle expired.

He was helpless in the cellar, with the rats and the damp darkness on every hand!

CHAPTER XXVI.

STRIKING A HOT SCENT.

"Dis is w'at don't stick well in me crop!" muttered Scrimpy, in disgust, as he glared somewhat sullenly down Sixth avenue. "Dunno's I was cut out fer no detective arter all, an' I'd jest begun ter tink I was some guns. If I could only git track of dat feller Rockvelt I'd feel high. Wonder where de blue blinkers he kin be keepin'?"

dat black 'tash of his'n? If I could only spot dat once, I'd never take me eyes off it till I run it inter its hole.

"Der boss didn't jump on me neck at all, but I reckon he 'tought I hed 'bout outlived me usefulness, an' dat made me feel elegant! I like ter be reckoned as 'mountin' ter a little somethin'."

"Now here I be, an' I dunno ary which way ter turn. W'at's ter be did?"

He considered the situation for several minutes, and then his face suddenly cleared a bit.

"I'll try Doc Webber's," he nodded. "I struck somet'in' dere oncet, an' mebbe I kin ag'in. Dere hain't no tellin', an' any'in' is better dan dis."

With that, he sauntered down the avenue.

Scrimpy did not look much like the ragged gamin driven out of Webber's by the bartender the last time he was there, for he was attired in his best clothes, and his manner was that of a young lad who considered himself something of a blood.

Reaching Webber's, he had no hesitation about sauntering boldly in and calling for a beer.

The barkeeper looked at him keenly and then shook his head.

"You can't get it here," he declared.

"Well, if not, why not?" inquired Scrimpy.

"We hain't sellin' it to kids."

"Who's a kid?"

"Come, come! get a move on!"

The detective's assistant slammed a silver dollar down on the bar.

"Dere's me money; shove der beer! I knows me gait, cully, so hop off der perch."

Several of the spectators showed their amusement, but the barkeeper scowled.

"Chase yourself through that door!" he ordered. "You are too big for your size!"

"An' you give me great pains!" promptly retorted the saucy lad. "You needs a reducer."

"A reducer?"

"Yep—ter wear on yer head."

At this, a big man laughed outright, observing:

"You have run against a snag, Billings."

The barkeeper growled.

"I'll break his head!"

"Yours don't need breakin'," soberly declared Scrimpy. "It was borned cracked."

"Say, give the boy a beer," put in the big man.

"Don't dare to do it," retorted the man behind the bar. "You should know it don't go in this place."

"Well, here, give me one. That's O. K. Now I can do what I please with it.—Here, my cute shaver, down this."

But Scrimpy drew off.

"T'ankie, mister," he replied; "but I don't do business in dat way. I'm on de dead level, an' if I can't git me stuff at der bar reg'ler, I don't take it at all. I'm goin' ter git a stretcher an' pull meself out a couple or three feet longer, so dese chump slop-slingers will take a tumble ter me importance. Dey dunno w'at dey're doin' w'en dey refuses ter shove over der guzzle fer dis chick."

This seemed to amuse the big man mightily.

Just then two other men approached the bar, and Scrimpy recognized them as Harry Wait and Frank Kelsey, the men with whom he had seen Paul Prince when he last visited Webber's.

The portly sport ordered whisky, and the two began to talk "horse" over their glasses.

The big man was talking to Scrimpy, and, although pretending to listen, the detective's assistant was doing his best to hear what passed between Kelsey and Wait. The barkeeper had not ordered him out in a business-like manner, and he was for staying as long as there was a possibility of finding anything worth keeping him there.

Discovering the boy would not drink the beer, the big man emptied the glass, taking sufficient time in doing so. Scrimpy managed to keep up a broken conversation with his would-be friend, thinking it would seem that he was under the man's protection while he did so.

After a little, a third man approached the two sports at the bar. His face was covered by a black beard, and a wide-brimmed hat was pulled low down over his eyes. He seemed to hesitate a moment, then he spoke to Wait and Kelsey, his voice being guarded.

The two horse-fanciers turned on the bewhiskered man, their surprise being evident, although he held out his hands familiarly to both.

"Don't you know me?" he asked.

"I'm hanged if I do!" retorted Wait, plainly annoyed. "Who ther blazes are you?"

To this question the man made a reply that Scrimpy did not catch, but instantly the manner of the two men changed, and they both grasped the hands of the third.

"What does this mean?" questioned Wait. "Where have you been keeping yourself? and what in thunder are you rigged out in this way for?"

"Sb, 'sb!" sibilated the bearded man, casting covert glances around. "Not so loud! I'm in this rig for a reason, and I have been lying mighty low. Come into the back room and I will give you the lay-out."

The three promptly sought the seclusion of

the little room, but, as they passed, Scrimpy made a discovery.

"Hully geel!" he thought. "I'm onter dem whiskers! Dey are a fake! Dat cove is Bry Rockvelt!"

Naturally, the gamin was hugely delighted at this discovery. He had struck a scent at last.

Scrimpy managed to hang around within the saloon for a long time, but he was finally obliged to retire to the street.

It was growing dark, and he feared he would miss his man when Rockvelt left the saloon. Fortunately, his fears were groundless.

The trio came out together, all smoking cigars, and they halted on the corner a moment.

"Which way?" asked Kelsey, of the disguised Rockvelt.

"Over east," was the reply.

"Stopping there?"

"No."

"Where are you hanging out?"

"Over on Ninth, till the storm blows past."

At this both Kelsey and Wait laughed, the latter saying, half-mockingly:

"Think of a man of your caliber camping on Ninth avenue!"

The idea seemed highly ludicrous to the three men, for they all indulged in quiet laughter.

"What are you striking the other way for?" asked Kelsey.

"Got a date."

"Who with?"

"Prince."

"Is that so?"

"Dead level."

"Then the spotter is off?"

"Yes, he has dropped."

"Well, have a care."

"You bet!"

Then Wait and Kelsey shook hands with Rockvelt, and the trio parted.

Scrimpy was only interested in one of them, and Rockvelt had a shadower. The gamin had been near enough to catch the drift of their talk.

"So dere's goin' ter be a meet between der Plunger an' dis bloke," he thought. "Well, Mister Stubbs, you should make it a p'int ter be around in dat locality."

Rockvelt strode along to a point where he could catch a cross-town car, and Scrimpy swung on behind, as the disguised sport took the front end.

It was not far from Grand street Ferry that Rockvelt left the car.

Scrimpy had anticipated the move of the man he was following and dropped off first. Rockvelt's suspicions were not aroused, and he evidently felt secure in the disguise he was wearing.

The boy shadower was extremely cautious, for he did not wish to be baffled now, believing it was of great importance that he should follow Rockvelt.

In a short time he began to wonder why the man had gone so far out of the way, for the sport turned up-town and twisted back through the narrow streets. The only explanation possible seemed that he had played the trick to fling any one who might happen to be following him.

"All right," thought the gamin. "I'm onter you wid bote feet."

But he did not understand all of Rockvelt's turns and twists.

At length, on a dark corner, the man was met by a woman. It was too dark for the boy shadower to make out much about the appearance of the woman, but he determined to take the venture of creeping nearer the two, as Rockvelt seemed talking earnestly with the female.

The boy was successful in reaching a box near enough to hear some of their conversation, thanks to the darkness of that particular locality.

It did not take him long to make out that the woman was very old, and her voice was harsh and discordant.

"I tell ye she's all right!" snapped the aged creature. "I am takin' good keer of her!"

"I am not in the killing business," declared Rockvelt. "I suppose you understand that."

"Oh, what is the difference?"

"There is lots of difference! Great Scott! what are you made of? I believe you would strangle her for a few dollars extra!"

"Money is good!" croaked the old vixen. "It will buy all ther things we want."

An exclamation of disgust fell from the man's lips.

"You make me tired, Mother Mumm!"

"Oh, you hain't no saint!" sneered the woman.

"And I do not profess to be. Men are not apt to be saints, but they naturally look for women to be something better than themselves. You are a degraded old creature who will sell your body and soul for a dollar!"

Hisscorn angered her.

"What made me so?" she cried, fiercely. "Man! Do you hear? Man! They prate about ther goodness of wimmen, but there's not one of 'em as don't stan' ready ter drag ther best woman down, only give him half a chance! They will pull a poor girl inter ther mud, an' then

they'll leave her there! Oh, I know 'em all—know 'em fer w'at they be! Don't prate ter me! You are jest as bad as ther rest! W'at do you want of this poor gal, eh? I know w'at yer want—you can't fool me!"

"Take a reef in that tongue, Mother Mumm!" sternly commanded the sport, his hand falling on the old woman's shoulder. "We do not want the neighborhood to hear what we have to say."

"You don't want ter kill her body," persisted the aged creature; "but you stand ready ter kill her soul!"

"You are mistaken; I only want this girl kept where she can do me no harm."

At this, the woman laughed croakingly.

"That does well ter tell."

Rockvelt saw it was useless to talk with her, so he said:

"You tell me the girl is all right, but I think I will take a look at her."

"You want ter see her?"

"Yes."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"I will follow you to her."

"All right."

"Lead on."

They started, and Scrimpy promptly prepared to continue the shadow act.

"Hi Jinks!" he delightedly whispered. "I'm dead on a hot scent, ur I dunno me own name! If dis hain't der gal w'at der boss tried ter take erway from dem blokes, den I'm a chump! If I finds her, I'll be doin' a great job. I reckon I'm in dis detective business arter all."

The trail was truly growing hot.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SCRIMPY FALLS THROUGH.

THE old woman led Rockvelt to a none too savory quarter, not far from where Avenue A strikes Houston street.

Scrimpy followed.

Suddenly both man and woman disappeared into a dark alley.

The boy slid swiftly forward and tried to pierce the darkness with his keen eyes. Although he feared a trap, he was not the one to hesitate about entering the alley.

"Here goes nuthin'," he thought, as he turned into the denser shadows of the place.

To his dismay he could find no trace of the ones he had been following. He hurried down the alley until he came to another exit, but he saw nothing of man or woman.

They had disappeared.

Then Scrimpy felt pleasant.

"If it wasn't so fur, I'd go fall off der dock!" he growled, as he vigorously punched his own head with his clinched fist. "Dis gives me great weariness!"

He spent considerable time searching for a possible clew to the course taken by the parties in whom he was interested, but there were so many doors opening into the alley that he could settle on none of them.

He finally decided to lay quiet and watch till Rockvelt and Mother Mumm reappeared.

Barely had he decided on this course of action—or inaction—when a dark figure suddenly arose before him, seeming to come out of the ground. Then a rather hollow voice addressed him:

"For whom searchest thou, youth?"

"Holy smoke!" gasped Scrimpy. "Have I stirred up a ginuwine spooky-spooky?"

He was really startled.

"Have no fear, my son," commanded the other, in a voice that was evidently meant to be reassuring. "I have no thought of doing you harm."

"Well, dat's clever on your part."

"Were you looking for her?"

"Guess I was."

"I divined as much, but I fear your search will be fruntless."

"Well, I don't care fer fruit, any great."

"She is not here."

"So I see."

"But, listen."

"Me cars is wide open."

"I know where she is hidden."

"Bully fer you!"

"Long, long did I search, till at last I found her."

"Dat's der stuff!"

"She is down—deep down."

"Dere's lots of peoples dat is down."

Suddenly the man took a stride and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, the movement being so sudden Scrimpy was unable to avoid him, and when the lad tried to free himself from the grasp, he was unable to do so.

"The wicked squirm when there is no reason for fear," fell solemnly from the unknown's lips.

"Be quiet."

"Guess it's 'bout der only t'ing ter do," said the boy; but he was ready to make a desperate battle should such a thing become necessary.

"I have told you I would not harm you."

"An' I done me pritty wid t'anks."

"I knew you would come."

"Who told yer?"
 "The moon."
 "Well, I don't have any business wid der moon arter dis give away."
 "The moon has told me many secrets."
 "Reckon it must be a woman in der moon, 'stead of a man. Wimmen never kin keep secrets, yer know."
 "Thy talk is frivolous."
 "Jimminy Christmas! Is dat dangerous? If it is, I'll go to a dentist an' have me talker pulled out."

The man was silent for some moments, and the gamin's eyes had become so accustomed to the darkness of the place that he could see the gray beard with which the unknown's face was covered.

It would not be truthful to say that Scrimpy was not scared at all, for he was really alarmed, being shrewd enough to understand the man was deranged. The owner of the gray beard might be utterly harmless, but it was not what the boy called "fun" to be alone in a dark alley and held fast by a lunatic.

If there had been a chance to do so, the gamin would have "made a break;" but the man seemed watching for just such a move, and he did not give an opportunity.

After a brief silence, the deranged slowly said:

"I think perhaps we had better go down."
 "Me time is limited," objected Scrimpy.
 "Your time is at my disposal, youth," sternly declared the man.

"Since w'en?"
 "It has been so for ages."
 "Great Scott! I must be older dan Merthusulum!"

"You annoy me with many irrelevant sayings."

"Ob, jeel! Ir-ir-ir—what did yer say! Where did yer pick up all dem heavy words?"

To this the old man—for he was evidently aged—did not reply, but he asked:

"Would you like to see her?"

"Who?"

"The one I found beneath the ground."

"Is she alive?"

"She still lives, though buried."

"Wat's der price of admission ter der show?"

Again the man did not answer.

"You shall see her," he asserted. "Come."

He would have led the boy from the spot, but Scrimpy held back.

"I hain't said I wanted ter go. My time is mighty precious, I tells yer. Take a tumble ter yerself an' shake yer grip on this chick. I'll give yer an imitation of a feller tryin' ter outrun a cyclone. It'll be more fun dan der Injuns!"

But the man did not seem to take any stock in that kind of "fun."

"You must not hold back, youth," he said, sternly. "I have no desire to harm you, but I may have to use violence if you are not a willing subject in my hands. You were sent here by a power other than your own."

"Well, I am dead sore on dat power!"

"You were sent to see her."

"Come, now, old pard, give it to us straight! Who is dis 'her' you're chinnin' 'bout so much? Wat's her name?"

The man pressed his free hand to his head.

"Her name?" he murmured. "I cannot seem to think, though I knew it once. Strange—Ha! that is my name! I am Doctor Strange, and all the world shall ring with my name some day!"

The boy started, for Dan had told him all about Dr. Strange. This, then, was the lunatic who had attacked Count Mirabeau in the house afterward destroyed by fire.

The old man would dally no longer, and Scrimpy was forced to accompany him, though he continued to watch for a chance to escape.

Keeping a firm grip on the boy, the madman led the way through a low doorway into the darkness of an ill-smelling building.

The boy wondered if he would ever come forth alive.

Through the dense darkness they made their way, the lunatic evidently being quite familiar with his surroundings. Beneath their feet the floor was rotten and shaky at times.

At length, they descended some stairs and were in a cellar. Then they squeezed themselves through a damp passage, where there were slimy rocks on every hand.

A feeling of horror grew on the boy with each passing moment, and he wondered at his own folly in not making a desperate fight against odds, rather than to have submitted so tamely. What could be the purpose of the madman other than murder, and what a place for such a terrible crime it was! He began to wonder how many others had fallen victims to the lunatic in that dreadful place.

Then, all at once, Scrimpy remembered he had a revolver in his pocket. He nearly uttered a triumphant shout of delight, as his hand sought and felt the weapon through his clothing.

Why hadn't he thought of it before?

He could not answer the question.

Now he would not tamely submit to assassination there in the darkness of the dank cellar.

When the time came, he would use the revolver.

"I'll blow a hole t'rough der jay big enough ter fling a cat t'rough widout touchin' der rim of

it!" he thought. "Hope der old guy don't make me salt him, but w'en it comes ter guunnin', he'll find me right dere wid bote feet."

Suddenly the maniac stopped, still retaining his grip on the lad. They had made their way through the narrow passage and were in a cellar, the dimensions of which could only be guessed at by Scrimpy.

"Hush!" cautioned the old man.

They listened.

Somewhere, from some unknown spot, came the sound of human voices. At first, Scrimpy was startled by the sound, for it was strange and hollow, making one imagine it might be of a ghostly nature.

All at once, the maniac doctor began to laugh and chuckle in a horrible fashion, causing the gamin's blood to run cold in his veins.

"She is there!" he said, guardedly. "Oh, yes! And some one is with her. Ha! ha! They little dream I have found her! What would they do if they knew it? I suppose they would take her away. Well, they shall not know it till I am ready, and then—she will be gone. They mean to kill her—they are not satisfied with burying her alive. Oh, but I'll fool them—I'll baffle them!"

Scrimpy said nothing, but his curiosity had been aroused to the highest pitch. What did it all mean?

It almost seemed that Dr. Strange read the thoughts of his companion, for he said:

"Come, you shall see."

He pulled the lad forward, cautioning him against making any noise.

In a few moments they halted, and, when Scrimpy put out his hand, it touched a wall that was before them.

Carefully the maniac removed a small stone from the wall, beyond which still sounded the hum of voices.

The removal of the stone allowed a ray of light to shoot into the cellar.

The deranged doctor looked through the aperture thus made, and then he drew back, whispering:

"Look! She is there! Behold her!"

Scrimpy peered through the breach in the wall.

Then he clasped his hands over his mouth to keep back a cry of astonishment.

"Jimminy Rickets!" he hoarsely sibilated.

"It's der same gal, sure as shootin'!"

The maniac's grip tightened on his shoulder.

"Do you know her?" cautiously asked Dr. Strange.

"Hully gee! I should suss so!"

"Who is she?"

"A gal wat's bein' used mighty rotten!"

"Her name—her name!"

"Oh, I hain't jest sure of dat."

The deranged gave a sigh of despair.

"I feared as much," he said.

Again Scrimpy peered through the opening in the wall, and he saw there were two other persons in the cellar room with the girl.

Once more he suppressed his surprise with difficulty, for they were Rockvelt and the old woman he had met on the corner.

"Dis is nuts!" thought the boy. "Why, dis rattlebrained old bloke has put me onter a great snap! Oh, mum! won't der boss have a fit w'en I tells him dis!"

The detective's assistant was delighted with the discovery.

He listened at the aperture.

The girl was standing erect, boldly confronting the man and the hag-like old woman. Her head was thrown back, and, although she was very pale and wan, her spirit did not seem broken. She was speaking:

"No, I am not dead," she was saying; "although it is a wonder. God must be very kind to sustain me through so much, and I think he means that I shall triumph over you all in the end. I know not what I have ever done that you should persecute me in such a terrible manner."

"Hear her! hear her!" grated the old hag.

"Her back needs breakin'! Oh, I'd like ter use her jest as I hev a mind to!"

"What have I ever done to you?" demanded the girl.

"You've looked at me with them pritty eyes of yourn—looked like ye hated me! Ah-ha! I'd like ter scratch 'em out!"

She started forward, her hands twisted into the shape of claws.

"Here, here!" exclaimed Rockvelt, catching her by the shoulder. "What are you up to?"

"Oh, you won't let me do fer her, eh?"

"You seem to have changed your tune, old woman. A little while ago you were venting your rage against all mankind of the masculine gender; now you would assault a defenseless girl."

"'Cause she looks at me so! I know I'm one of the devil's own, but nobody has any right to tell me so—not even with their eyes!"

"Be quiet! I came here to see if you told me the truth when you said she was all right."

"Well, you have found out."

"I am not exactly pleased with her appearance. I believe you do not feed her well."

"Ob, sir!" cried the girl, in a pitiful manner; "I have no appetite—I cannot eat!"

"No!" snarled the hag. "She refuses food that's too good fer her."

"All because I cannot swallow it. Who would have any appetite, were they shut up in this horrid place?"

Rockvelt could not reply.

"It's all contrariness!" raved the old woman. "She could eat if she was a mind ter."

"You know that is not true."

"Oh, then I'm a liar? You vixen! Do you dare call me that?"

The old hag had probably been drinking, for she seemed devoid of judgment, and she now made a spring for the girl, who fell back, uttering a cry of fear.

"I'll kill ye! I'll kill ye!" howled Mother Mumm, striking the captive with her skinny hands and fairly frothing at the mouth.

"Great Moses! she will kill her!" exclaimed Scrimpy, filled with anger and horror.

Then the gamin drew back, governed by a sudden impulse, and hurled himself against the wall.

He had scarcely expected it to fall before the onslaught, but it did so, and he plunged forward into the other cellar, carrying with him a mass of stone and earth, and falling in a heap on the ground, with the shattered wall piled all around him.

Then he quickly scrambled up, and found himself face to face with the astounded Bry Rockvelt.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GAMIN CAPTURED.

LITTLE wonder Rockvelt was astonished, for the gamin's appearance had been of a nature to startle the most nervy.

Scrimpy was not a little surprised and dazed himself, for he had acted on a sudden impulse, scarcely thinking the wall would fall before his onset.

He tried to brush the dust from his eyes, as he faced the man who was staring at him.

The disguised sport quickly recovered, leaping forward and catching the boy by the shoulder.

"Hello!" he snarled. "What the blazes does this mean? Who are you? and where did you come from?"

"I'm a gopher," was the retort; "an' I come out of de groun'. Take a fall ter yerself an' git yer dirty fingers off me Sunday clothes!"

As usual, Scrimpy's tongue was ready with a pert reply.

"You're a spy!" grated the gambler.

"Naw; I'm jest a kid."

Mother Mumm had ceased her attack on the girl, and she now cried, shrilly:

"Course he's a spy! Kill him!—strangle him!"

"If yer kills me, I'll be dead," was the gamin's astounding retort. "But I hain't done nuthin' ter be kilt fer."

"I am not so sure of that," said Rockvelt, as he kicked the boy's feet from under him, throwing the detective's aid heavily to the ground. "I guess we will have to make you fast, while we investigate."

But Scrimpy did not relish becoming the captive of the sport, and he began to fight desperately, stunned and confused though he was.

"If yer makes me fast, you've got ter hustle fer it!" he gritted. "I hain't der kind of a chick dat ye kin do jest as yer likes wid."

"Lay still, you little devil!"

The lad had no intention of obeying, and Rockvelt found it no easy thing to secure him.

"I will have to knock some sense into your head!" panted the man, striking viciously at his supple little foe.

Scrimpy managed to squirm aside in time to avoid the blow, and Rockvelt's fist was skinned on the rocks, causing the man to rave furiously.

Where was Dr. Strange?

Scrimpy asked himself the question, wondering why the maniac did not take a hand in the affray. If he would only appear and assault Rockvelt, things would look more favorable for the detective's plucky assistant.

But Dr. Strange did not show up, and Rockvelt finally overpowered the boy, having disarmed Scrimpy, as the lad produced his revolver.

"You little devil!" fumed the man. "So you would shoot me?"

"I'd do anyt'ing I had ter," was the reply.

With the butt of the revolver, the gambler struck Scrimpy a blow that stunned the boy so he became helpless to resist.

As the unfortunate shadower lay powerless in Rockvelt's grasp, Mother Mumm brought some rope, with which he was made secure, hands and feet.

"There!" breathed the black-mustached sport, as he stood on his feet, looking down at the captive; "you are hard and fast, though you did make a game fight. I wonder if you were alone."

Scrimpy did not reply, but he looked his feelings, which were anything but agreeable.

"Give me that light, Mother Mumm," ordered Rockvelt. "I will look into that other cellar and find out if there was any one with this fool boy. Hang fast to the girl while I leave you in the dark."

"Never be skeered fer that," croaked the old.

bag. "I will make sure she does not give us the slip."

Rockvelt took up the oil lamp and passed through the breach in the wall.

The captive boy held his breath, wondering if Dr. Strange would be discovered. He hoped not, for, although the man was deranged, he thought it possible he would assist them some way.

The kidnapped girl had remained passive after the unexpected appearance of the gamin, and she made no movement while Rockvelt was absent from the cellar.

Through the breach in the wall Scrimpy could see the gambler moving about with the lamp in his hand, and the lad waited breathlessly for the commencement of the struggle which he more than half-believed would take place.

But there was no struggle. Rockvelt returned without finding a trace of Dr. Strange.

"Were you alone?" he demanded of Scrimpy. "Don't you wish ye knowed?" saucily retorted the boy.

"I do know."

"Den w'at yer axin' me fer?"

"To see what you would say."

"Well, I guess you see'd."

"You have tumbled into a bad scrape."

"Is dat so?"

"You are apt to find it so. You will remain on the retired list for a time."

"Is dat so?"

"You will be a mighty quiet gopher for a week or two."

"Is dat so?"

It is impossible to express in cold type the scorn and defiance the gamin threw into his words by placing the accent in three different positions.

Rockvelt put down the lamp and sat down on the edge of a rude couch, staring blackly at the boy, who, helpless though he was, grinned cheerfully and winked at the disguised rascal.

"I should t'ink you'd git yer whiskers cut," observed the irrepressible youth. "Youse could have dem made inter a fur mat."

Rockvelt said nothing, and the boy went on, recklessly:

"You know whiskers are sellin' fer five a bag, so yer might make yer fortune. Take dat fer a tip, cully. Dey'd be mighty good ter scare rats wid. An' den dey might be used fer a fedder duster. See? Why don't yer have dem pulled out if dey pains yer? I s'pose you sets up nights wid 'em, eh? It must be you wears dem ter hide der face underneat' so ye can't see yer own reflection in der glass. Bet your face'd break a common mirror all ter smash."

He did not seem in the least disconcerted by his misfortune, and Rockvelt could not help admiring the boy's pluck.

"How did you come in that other cellar?" asked the gambler.

"Der reg'ler way."

"How is that?"

"Walked wid me feet."

"You had better shut down on your sauciness, if you have any desire to get off without having a broken neck!"

"Sauce? Why I t'ought dey pronounced dat sass! You must have somet'ing in yer mout', old fel'."

"How did you happen to enter that cellar?"

"Biz."

"Business?"

"Yep."

"What business could have taken you there?"

"Dat's tellin'."

"Well, you had better tell and talk straight, if you know when you are well off. I am not going to fool with you any longer."

"Dat's right. Just go 'way an' let me be."

"Who sent you into that cellar, boy?"

"Nobody."

"Is that true?"

"Straight stuff."

Rockvelt looked doubtful.

"Then tell me exactly why you were there."

"I was looking for a place ter bunk."

"That is not true."

"Why not?"

"You can't make me believe you were trying to find a place to sleep in that damp part of the cellar, for you are well-dressed. You may as well understand you cannot fool me."

Scrimpy had forgotten he was wearing his best togs, instead of being attired in his usual street costume.

"W'at's der use of my tellin' yer anyt'ing!" he exclaimed. "No matter w'at I tole yer, you wouldn't b'lieve it."

"If you told the truth, I would know it. Were you spying on me?"

"Mebbe so."

The gambler scowled.

"I thought as much! Well, you were brought up with a round turn."

"I wasn't never brought up a tall—I jest come up anyway."

"I have seen you before."

"No!"

"I saw you in Webber's this very night! By Jove! that's it! Now I am satisfied you were spying on me! Well, you will be sorry you ever took the job!"

"W'at be yer goin' ter do wid me?"

"I have not decided. For the present I shall

leave you here. Confound it! you have ruined that wall and spoiled this place for my purpose!"

"Hooray fer me!"

Rockvelt stared at the broken wall for some time, and the gamin watched him closely. At length the gambler seemed to arrive at a conclusion, and he turned to the old hag.

"Mother Mumm," he said, "you will have two prisoners to watch for a little while."

"I kin watch 'em both as well as one," asserted the beldame. "I'll take keer of 'em."

"See that you do, for if either should escape, the dickens would be to pay." Then he took out his handsome gold watch and glanced at it, adding:

"I will take one or both from your charge before morning. As it is, I have an engagement that must be kept at once, and that takes me away now. You shall be well paid for your additional trouble."

"That is all I kin ask," croaked the old crone, bobbing her head. "I'll do anything fer money—ha! ha!—yes, anything! I sold my soul an' body fer money years an' years ago, w'en I was a handsome gal. Money is all I keer fer."

"I will satisfy your greedy old soul, if you do not fail me. Look out for the girl; the boy is secure."

"All right, all right."

With a few words more, Rockvelt departed, leaving the captives in charge of the hideous and conscienceless old hag.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MOTHER MUMM ON GUARD.

AFTER forcing the girl to the couch, Mother Mumm crouched on the floor, watching the captives and occasionally muttering to herself.

It was not a pleasant position, by any means, and Scrimpy hated himself for falling into the trap. Had he jerked forth his revolver the moment he arose from the ground after coming through the wall and covered Rockvelt, the result might have been different. But the shock of the fall had stunned him, and the dust had filled his eyes, so he fell a captive to the gambler.

As he lay there, the boy thought of various manners of escape, but, being securely bound, he could put none of his plans into operation. If he were only free!

Mother Mumm was watching him closely, and the old hag chuckled as she saw him tugging at his bonds.

"Oh, you're tight an' fast—tight an' fast!" she croaked. "If ther gal was as fast, it'd save me heaps of trouble."

That seemed to give the ugly creature an idea, and it was but a short time before she produced some rope and declared she was going to bind the girl.

Up to this point, since the startling appearance of Scrimpy in the cellar, the girl had kept quiet; but she now protested against being tied, although she showed her fear of the old woman.

"Keep still!" snarled Mother Mumm. "If ye don't keep still an' let me do as I want ter, I'll choke yer till ye do! Oh, I know how ter handle your kind—I do!"

"How have I ever harmed you that you should treat me thus?" pleaded the unfortunate maiden.

"Oh, don't ask such questions! Don't ye understand I'm doin' this fer money? I'm well paid fer watchin' yer."

"I will pay you to set me free."

The hag laughed harshly.

"That is good!" she sneered. "Why you hain't got no money—you're poor as a beggar! That's why I can't understand w'at they want ter keep ye a prisoner fer. They can't make any money out of it. But"—leering into the unfortunate one's face—"ye'r purty! Oh, he! he! he! You've got a purty face, an' yer figger's slick. I reckon I know men well enough ter read ther ones as set me ter watch over yer. I know w'at they want, though he tried to make me think I didn't."

The fair captive shuddered and shrunk back from that evil face and those horrible eyes, feeling her blood turned to ice in her heart, for she could not fail to understand the beldame's vile meaning.

"Oh, Heavenly Father!" she moaned, covering her pale face with her hands; "is there no escape?"

"Escape!" croaked Mother Mumm, catching her by the slender wrist with one skinny hand.

"You think of escape now! The time will come w'en you'll go gladly down ther easy road that leads ter ther Burnin' Pit. Ther first part of ther way is soft an' easy an' delightful. I know, for I traveled it all. I thought it was alwus goin' ter be so. Fool, fool, fool! I never dreamed of the time w'en I'd be old an' all my good looks'd be gone! Look at me now!—look, I say! Idiot!—what are ye skeered of? Would you think this face was fair an' round an' full of color once? No, no, no! Well, it was! I looked as well as you—yes, better! I had hot blood in my veins—I loved life, an' everything seemed sweet an' beautiful. Then—in the long years ago—scores of lovers flocked around me an' poured honeyed words in my ears. They tole me how fair I was—how my eyes were like stars an' my hair like midnight. They was kind an'

attentive an' not one could do too much for me. I was queen among them all! W'at am I now?"

The old woman had worked herself up to a pitch that was really appalling in its dramatic intensity. Her aged eyes blazed, her wrinkled face turned purple, and foam flecked her lips. She still clung to the kidnapped girl's wrist, although the maiden tried to free herself several times.

"That's ther way—struggle an' flutter! They all do so at first; pretty soon they come to like it. This is a dismal hole, but when you do as they want ye to, they'll put ye in a gilded cage. Oh, you'll like that! All the fool birds like it! They don't know any better! They plume themselves in fine togs an' live on ther best feed an' drink, an' they don't dream ther beauty's bein' sapped from ther cheeks. The dollars they git are flung to ther wind. If I'd been sharp, I might have been rich now—yes, rich! There was fortunes wasted on me! You don't believe that? Well, it was so! You think I was alwus a poor an' ignerent thing! 'Tain't true! I had a purty good education, but ther life I have led has took it all away from me. If I'd saved the dollars, I might be livin' in a grand house an' ridin' in my own team. Then the people who'd cross the street to git away from me now would be callin' to see me. I might have buried the past.—But what one of 'em all does that? Not one!"

"Say," chipped in Scrimpy; "you're talkin' yerself outer breathe, ole gal."

Mother Mumm still had the rope in her hand, and she once more flung herself on the girl.

"Keep still, now!" she grated. "I'm only goin' ter tie ye so you won't cause me any fuss. If you don't kick, I won't hurt ye."

Evidently the maiden thought it best to submit, for she made no struggle.

When she had completed the work to her satisfaction, Mother Mumm drew off and looked the prisoners over.

"There," she said, "I reckon you are fast. This thinkin' of the old life has got me inter a terrible state, so I guess I'll have ter have some beer. I kin leave ye now 'thout your runnin' away."

Then she hobbled away and left the cellar.

Scrimpy was the first to speak.

"Say."

"What is it?" faintly asked the girl.

"Is your name Vira Selwick?"

"Yes, yes! How did you know?"

"Oh, I found it out! I t'ought youse must be dat gal. We's in a be-rippin' ole scrape."

"It is terrible!" moaned the girl. "I have no friends to search for me, and I know not what will become of me."

"Don't you go fer ter t'inkin' ye hain't got no friends. Me an' Dan is yer friends, an' we's a whole crowd."

"Who is Dan?"

"He's der daisiest detective in der world, an' I'm his side-pard. Why, jest de mention of his name makes der most desperate criminal ter-r-remble. He has a way of yankin' dem up wid a round turn."

"How is it he knows of me?"

"Oh, we got a tip. Der old jay w'at sells dimints on Broadway gived us a p'inter."

"Mr. Prince?"

"Dat's der gent."

"Oh, does he know—does he suspect?"

"What d'yer mean?"

"About Paul—about that horrid impostor."

"Ha! W'at's dis I hear? Does me ears work all straight? W'at erbout Paul?"

"Oh, I do not know! Paul went away to Europe, but it was not the same Paul who came back."

Scrimpy endeavored to stand on his head, but not having his hands to assist him, failed flatly.

"Hully gee!" he squealed. "Do you mean dat?"

"I certainly do."

"Oh, wow! Dat 'splains der whole t'ing! Won't der boss faint?"

The girl was puzzled.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"We was workin' on dis case. Der old man put us on. He t'ought his boy was actin' crooked an—"

"He was deceived in the wretch!"

"I bet!"

"At first I was not sure—I could not believe it possible another person had returned to play the part of Paul. One night I dreamed of it, and I saw Paul confined in a dungeon-like place, while this other was enjoying his privileges. Even then I had my doubts. But he was afraid of me, and he had broken the engagement. Father had vanished, and I was so troubled I knew not what to do. I met him and charged him with being an impostor. He indignantly denied it."

"An' then—what?"

"That very night I was seized by some men who dragged me away from my home. Since then I have been in their power."

"Der crooked cove is at der bottom of it all."

"Paul?"

"Sure."

"I have thought so—I am sure of it."

"Course you be! He's a scab!"

"Once I nearly escaped, aided by some unknown friends; but he found me. He made

me believe I was in some danger. I was so confused I knew not what he said or what I did. I let him take me from the room where my stranger friend had told me to remain."

"Dat was Dan."

"Well, outside there were lots of people, and he hurried me away."

"I was follerin'."

"You?"

"Yep."

"I did not see you."

"You was too flustered ter see anyting."

"That is true. But I finally realized I was with him, and I tried to get away. He forced me into a cab, and I was carried away, a captive again."

"An' I was knocked silly, or else I'd follered dat cab. Say."

"What?"

"Did der old gal tie yer up tight?"

"I think so."

"Can't yer git yer han's free nohow?"

"I don't know."

"Well, jest youse find out lively. If you kin git free, youse kin untie me, an' I'll help ye out of here."

"I will try."

"Be lively fore der old gal gits back. She'll raise der deuce if she ketches us."

Urged by the hope of escape, the girl tugged at her bonds. Mother Mumm had thought there was little danger of her trying to get free, and therefore had not paid as much attention to the knots as she might have done. Summoning all her strength, Vira twisted and pulled at the ropes, pluckily bearing without a murmur the pain it caused.

"It's no use!" she sobbed, after a time. "I can't get free!"

"Don't dey give a bit?" anxiously asked Scrimpy.

"I felt them give some at first, but it was not enough."

"Don't yer give it up; stick to it a little longer. Mebbe ye'll do it next time."

Thus urged, she once more attempted to free her hands. The gamin watched her struggles with the greatest anxiety.

"I think I am getting one hand free!" exclaimed the girl.

"Den stick to it!" urged the boy shadow.

"Hurry!"

"I will have it loose in a moment," panted the excited maiden.

"Hark!"

They listened and heard sounds approaching.

"Holy Moses!" groaned Scrimpy. "Der old woman's comin' back!"

CHAPTER XXX.

INTO THE RAT HOLE.

DOUBLE-VOICE DAN'S position was not an enviable one, to say the very least.

The candle had burned out and darkness filled the dank cellar.

Listening, he could hear the rustling movements and the occasional squeals of the rats.

They were creeping toward him again!

The detective ground his strong white teeth with impotent rage. He strongly felt the horror of his situation, but he was helpless to do anything on his own account.

"Oh, curse the infernal luck!" he muttered fiercely. "I am not ready to kick the bucket in this fashion! I do not fear death, but I would like to die in a manly manner."

Once more he felt the rats brushing against him and running over his legs, and he thought it could not be long before they made a combined attack on him.

"Get out, you devils!" he shouted.

As if at his command, the host of rodents fled squealing into the recesses of the cellar. He wondered at this, but it was not long before he heard stealthy sounds all around him.

Were the rats returning?

Suddenly, not far from his feet, he heard a hollow and ghost-like laugh.

Barely had the sound died out before it was echoed near his head, and then it came from his right and his left.

A man of delicate nerves would have been shocked and frightened. Dan was certainly startled, but he was not frightened, for he instantly detected a trick to prey on his fears.

"Very good!" he commented, his calmness almost surprising himself. "Sounds like the croaking of frogs. Try it again—now, all together—grand chorus."

He was not obeyed.

Up flashed four lights, and the glare of as many dark-lanterns was suddenly flung upon the helpless man. He could not see the hands that held the lanterns or the owners of the hands, but he knew there were four persons there.

"Well," said a harsh voice, "here is the spy."

"Here is the spy," echoed three other voices.

"What shall we do with him?" asked the first.

"Kill him!"

"Torture him!"

"Throw him to the rats!"

"You need not bother about doing any throwing," observed Dan. "All you will have to do is leave me alone. I will guarantee the rats will attend to me directly."

"But you are not giving me a fair shake. All I ask is half a show, but I am not getting any show at all. You are numerous, but I will fight the gang, if you will set me free."

"Without doubt!" sarcastically chuckled the man at Dan's right. "But you must take us for fools."

"Oh, not at all, dear sir!" assured the helpless detective, biting scorn in his tones. "Cowards are not necessarily fools."

At this there was angry muttering.

"You had better hold fast to your tongue, my man!" growled the one who seemed the leader of the party with the lanterns. "It is well to be discreet when you are helpless."

Dan laughed.

"That is as good as a threat, and by threatening a helpless man you prove yourselves most contemptible."

"Let him go!" spoke a voice that Dan recognized. "He will have little chance to talk."

"That's so," put in the third. "We'll soon chuck him whar thar'll be no waggin' of his jaw."

The fourth remained silent.

"I have heard crooks talk before," sneered the captive. "Why didn't you finish me when you had me by the throat?"

"We were not sure about you then," replied the leader.

"Not sure?"

"No."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We were not positive you were Double-voice Dan, the detective."

"You are sure of it now?"

"I should say we were!"

"Then that is settled."

"You do not deny it?"

"Why should I? No, I do not deny I am the man who has placed any amount of your class behind the bars."

"You have won the name of the 'Always-on-Deck Detective,' but in this little affair you do not seem to be as much on deck as usual."

"Do not let that worry you, dear sir," was the cool retort. "Appearances are often deceptive, and I may come out on deck in the end."

At this apparent bravado the four behind the lights laughed in scornful chorus.

"You must be a fool to think we are going to let you get off now!" sneered the leader.

"Either that, or he thinks we are fools," asserted Number Two.

"Ther bloody whelp is bluffin'!" declared Number Three.

Once more Dan noticed the fourth remained silent.

The detective was a man who could remember voices quite as well as faces, and he felt sure he knew three of the men into whose power he had fallen. Of course Paul Prince was one of them.

"You are on top now," acknowledged the trapped ferret; "but every dog has his day."

"That is true," confessed the Plunger; "and you have had yours. It is past."

"Do you think so? You think you are having yours now, but let me tell you it is mighty near sunset. Your day will be a short one, and the night that follows endless."

Paul forced a scornful laugh.

"That is all right," he said, recklessly. "You will not be on hand to see the sun go down."

"That is what you think."

"That is what I know."

"Your knowledge is limited, Paul Prince."

"You know me?"

"Sure."

"Well, it does not matter. You will never be able to use that knowledge against me."

"That's straight," agreed the leader.

"That's what you think, Bry Rockvelt," said Dan; "but you have made mistakes in your life."

A savage exclamation of rage broke from the gambler's lips.

"So you are onto me, as well. All right. We shall be all the more careful to place you where you will do us no harm."

"Best cut his throat now, boss!" growled Number Three.

"I have not a doubt but you would like that job, Battery Ben," half-laughed Dan.

"You kin gamble your pile I would."

"Perhaps you had better do it."

"Why?"

"The time will come when I'll pull you in, if you don't finish me now."

"You tried that little job a while ago, but you didn't make it work. I give you the slip."

"You did, Benjamin, and I have wondered how you worked the trick."

"Easy 'nuff."

"Do you mind telling?"

"No."

"I am listening."

"I jest swum under the water, helped along by the current, till I was under the highest wharf. There I hung ter a timber till ye gave up the hunt."

"Very simple. you are a slippery dog, Benny, but you will slip up some day."

"Well, you won't be 'round to crow."

"Perhaps not."

"It's dead sure."

Dan was wondering who Number Four could

be, for that person remained quiet, having spoken only once or twice since the detective's enemies entered the cellar.

The four now retired a short distance, and the light of the lanterns revealed them to the helpless ferret. Dan knew they were consulting together over his fate.

"I guess this is the last job for me," he muttered, grimly. "All the same, I am going to show them a clean bluff to the end. There will be no weakening."

After several minutes of consultation, during which Dan could only catch a word now and then, they came back and stood around him.

"Your doom is sealed," solemnly declared Rockvelt.

"All right," said Dan, cheerfully. "What's the verdict?"

"Death, of course."

"Oh, of course; but how do you propose to snuff me out?"

"We shall throw you into the Rat Hole."

"What is that?"

"A place where other fools have been cast, not one of whom came forth alive."

"That is pleasant."

"If you are not killed by the fall, the rats will finish you."

"They will do that all right enough, if you leave me here."

"We do not mean to leave you here. If the place was searched you would be found; but no officer can find the Rat Hole."

Rockvelt gave the word, and Dan was dragged across the cellar-bottom till they came to a stone wall. Here the gambler fumbled with the stones a few minutes, and then what seemed to be solid stone and cement opened before them. Dan was lifted and Number Four held the light so he could look into the place.

He saw a large black hole that seemed bottomless.

"Looks pleasant, doesn't it?" sneered Rockvelt, all his vile nature coming to the surface now.

Dan had nerved himself to betray no fear, even if he felt any.

"I have a favor to ask," he said.

"A favor! Do you suppose we will grant it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I swear! You have nerve! What is it?"

"That you free my hands before you drop me into that place."

"What good will that do? The fall is pretty sure to kill you."

"If it does not, I want my hands free to fight off the rats for a time."

"You do not hope to escape?"

"Perhaps so."

"Well, you had better give up hope, for you have no show. All the same, we will set your hands free. That will only prolong your agony, for the rats will not be able to end you so quickly."

At a word from the gambler, Paul cut Dan's hands free. Then the detective was lifted and thrust toward the hole.

As he was being cast in, Dan caught at the cloth which covered the face of Number Four, and he succeeded in tearing it from the features it concealed.

A woman's countenance was revealed—a face fair and beautiful.

"Diamond Bess!" cried the detective.

Then he was thrust into the Rat Hole and went whirling downward into the darkness!

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE GREAT SEWER.

How strange it seems that sometimes a person will fall only a few feet and be killed, while another may drop from a terrible height and escape with scarcely an injury!

Down, down went the unlucky detective, and it seemed as if he would surely meet with instant death or terrible injury when he struck the bottom of the Rat Hole.

Not so.

He struck in soft mud and a small amount of water and was scarcely shocked.

Dan was really surprised to find himself still living, although he did not feel particularly elated over the fact, for he realized instant death might be preferable to the lingering agony of the fate that awaited him.

He heard voices above and looked upward. He saw a man leaning out over the mouth of the hole and looking downward.

"I think he is done for," said the voice of Bry Rockvelt. "The world will never know what became of Dan Downing, and one more blood-bound is out of the way."

A fierce rage filled the heart of the man in the Rat Hole, and it was with difficulty he remained silent. He burned to fling his curses at the heartless crook.

Rockvelt drew back. Then came a grating sound, as of rusty hinges, followed by a thud.

Darkness reigned in the Rat Hole!

For a time the detective was silent, but he finally muttered:

"Well, it seems as if I had reached the end of the race. Those devils are at the top of the heap, and I am done for! Of course it is not possible to get out of here, and there is not one

chance in ten thousand that this place will be found before I am dead. As that miserable crook said, 'the world will never know what became of Dan Downing.'

"What will Scrimpy think? The boy will not rest till he is satisfied there is no possibility of finding me, and I know he will suspect Rockvelt's gang of doing me up. I wonder if he will ever be able to get at the truth. If I thought he would discover what my fate was and bring those devils to punishment, I could die easier."

He felt around with his hands till he found a stone on which he could sit while he released his feet. He was covered with the sticky mud, but he did not mind that. The mud and water had broken his fall and preserved his life he knew, but he doubted if he owed thanks because of that.

His feet were soon free. Then he began to feel about the walls with his hands. He found he was in a circular well-like place, being shut in on every hand with bricks and cement. There was little hope of scaling the slimy sides of the Rat Hole, and he knew it would probably be impossible to escape from the place should he be able to climb to the top.

Dan was not a man to lie down and die without a struggle, but it did seem as if there was nothing to struggle against.

After a time, he thought of his matches.

"They will show me the kind of a place I am in," he muttered, as he drew forth the metallic case.

It was with difficulty he found a dry spot whereon to strike one of them, but he succeeded at last.

The light flashed up and he looked around.

What was that?

He started back, with an exclamation of horror, for the light showed at his very feet the rotting bones of a human skeleton!

As he stood staring at the horrid thing, the match burned to his fingers and he was forced to drop it, which instantly left him in dense darkness.

"One of their victims!" muttered the detective, as he felt for another match. "If I could only escape from this place, I would have evidence enough against them to place them where they should be—behind the bars."

He lighted another match and looked about. Then he made another discovery.

Close to one of the walls lay a second skeleton, to which portions of clothing still clung.

As Dan approached this second skeleton, he made a discovery.

The man had been at work on the brick wall and had succeeded in making a small opening. Through this opening the water had flowed into the Rat Hole.

Plainly this victim of New York crooks had not been killed by the fall into the hole and had made a desperate attempt to dig through the wall to freedom. A heavy clasp-knife was the instrument that had served him in his labor.

"Poor devil!" said the detective, bending over the skeleton. "He made a desperate stroke for life, but he could not live to get out of this vile hole. His strength failed, and the rats feasted on his flesh. He must have found a small opening here and tried to enlarge it. It was probably the place where the rats found admission."

"I wonder where the water comes from."

He was obliged to light several matches, in order to examine the place, which he did thoroughly. His courage gradually rose.

"It must be this opens into the nearest sewer," he said, after a time. "If that sewer is not too far away, I will make a desperate bid for life."

Then he fell to work on the wall, using the rusty clasp-knife to enlarge the opening.

Had there been a light within the hole, he would have been able to get along swiftly. As it was, he was forced to pause now and then and light a match, by the light of which he examined his work.

Dan was surprised with the swiftness of his progress. He made the opening larger and larger, and he fancied he soon heard a faint sound as of gently moving water. Of this he was not sure, however.

At length he reached a point where he could thrust his arm through into what seemed a large cavity. Then he struck another match and held it through the opening.

The light showed him his surmise had been correct.

He had reached the sewer!

It did not take Dan long to tear away the bricks and make an opening large enough to admit his body, after which he crept into the great underground drain of the city.

He knew the Rat Hole could not have been so very deep, or he would have been far below the level of the sewer.

After getting through the opening, he paused to strike a match. The light showed him an inky stream of water that swept noiselessly past at his feet. The sides of the sewer glistened with a sort of slime and the air was oppressive with an unwholesome odor.

"I would not like to spend the rest of my days here," thought Dan. He was now filled with a great hope of escaping from the sewer.

"I will be on deck again, for all of Rockvelt and his gang!" he laughed, exultantly. "I will bring them to the punishment they merit! Dan Downing has come near being snuffed out more than once, but he still lives."

He made his way along the sewer, following the course of the water. He knew the tide was out, and, as it was night, the amount of water carried off by the great drain was diminished in volume. He must escape from the sewer before the tide rose, or the water would drive him back and claim him as a victim.

Occasionally he would pause to light a match and look around. It was always the same dismal scene that met his gaze. He tried the sound of his voice and found it rung hollowly along the great arch.

Occasionally a few rats would go squealing and scampering away. One time the light of his match showed him a huge white rat that was almost as large as a cat.

"I do not care to make a feast for you," was Dan's mental observation.

Suddenly he paused and listened. He fancied that far, far away he had heard strange sounds. He knew it might be a trick of his imagination, but it was not long before he decided he really heard something.

What?

Human voices?

It seemed so, and yet there was something hollow and ghostly about the sounds.

What was that?

Far ahead he caught the glimmer of a light that, at first, seemed no larger than a tiny star. He stood still and watched it, soon discovering it was approaching.

The light was borne by human hands!

There were others besides the detective in the great sewer!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A STRANGE MEETING.

SCRIMPY'S disgust and dismay were unbounded when he discovered the old hag was returning.

"We're in fer it a while longer," he said, speaking to the girl. "Jest youse keep still an' mebbe der ole gal won't look at yer strings. If she don't do dat, youse may git a chance ter break out of dem an' unhitch dis child."

The girl was in despair.

"We will never be able to escape!" she moaned.

"Never say die," advised the plucky gamin.

Mother Mumm came stumbling into the cellar, bringing a battered pail that was full of foaming beer. She glanced searchingly at the captives and then chuckled with satisfaction.

"All solid—all safe!" she mumbled. "I knew they'd be. The old woman hain't no fool! They pay me ter take keer of these dearies, an' I keer fer 'em tenderly. He! he! he!"

The boy saw she had been drinking heavily, and his courage rose again.

"If she'll only git beazley full!" he thought.

Mother Mumm sat down on a box and took a long drink from the pail of beer.

"Ah, there's still something ter live fer!" she gurgled, drawing the back of her hand across her lips. "Good cold beer is the stuff to drink. Water—bah! City water is p'izen!"

She placed the pail on the ground, nearly letting it fall, which showed Scrimpy she was even more intoxicated than he had thought. Then she sat nodding on the box for a time, her eyes having that glassy far-away look so well understood by the gamin.

"If dere's only jest beer ernough!" he thought, anxiously. "Der old dame'll git fuller den a tick if she has all she wants. If she does dat, we's goin' ter make a break."

Mother Mumm muttered to herself, nodding and grinning in a ghastly fashion.

"Oh, yes, I was young oncet," she mumbled—"young an' hansum! They was all taken with me then—they run arter me. How I did dress! Why, I was a belle! An' all ther nob's—ther big-bugs was payin' court ter me. They've forgot me long ago, but I know where some of 'em live on Fifth avenue—I know! I could tell some things; but who'd believe old Mother Mumm? It's no use to talk—I may jest as well keep still."

"Well, I'll git a round pot out of this job, or I'll know the reason. That's goin' ter be enough ter last me the rest of my days. If they try ter play me crooked—well, the old woman kin strike like a snake!"

The final words were hissed in a manner that reminded the listening boy of a snake.

After a time, the old woman took another long drink, and when she relinquished the pail again, she began to snivel and sob.

"Heaven knows all I want is enough ter make me comfortable! I don't want ter die in the gutter! I hain't got many more years ter live; an' all I ask is a few comforts. I've been kicked round long enough! I don't keer fer money—it's ther things money'll buy."

And she continued in that strain for ten minutes, at the end of which time she emptied the pail of beer.

Five minutes later she rolled off the box and lay on the ground.

"Now's der time!" said Scrimpy, softly. "Everyting's all squee! Der ole lady'll keep

cool fer a good bit. Try hard ter git yer han's free."

"I have been trying right along," answered the girl; "and I think I shall succeed in a few moments."

"Good! We'll skip if yer do."

"Do you think we can get out of this cellar?"

"We kin try—an' Try is a feller w'at never was knocked out. All I'm 'feared of is dat der king cock of der gang'll come back 'fore we kin make a break."

Well might Scrimpy be afraid, for half an hour passed, and the girl had not been able to get her hands free. She had lost hope and was sobbing brokenly, while the boy tried to cheer her up.

"Don't give it up!" he urged. "If youse kin jest git so ye kin set me free, I'll fight fer yer till me wind is gone. I won't run away from yer, an' don't yer fergit dat! I hain't dat kind of a kid."

"But my wrists are all raw now," she panted. "I can't do anything more! Fate is against me!"

"Now don't yer go ter t'inkin' dat way. Try it oucet more, an' try fer all yer wort'. If we's kin git loose, it'll be better dan all der skin on der bote of our han's."

Setting her teeth firmly, the girl made one more desperate trial—and succeeded!

A low cry of delight broke from her lips.

"My hands are free!" she exclaimed, as she sat up.

Mother Mumm stirred and grunted.

"Sh!" hissed Scrimpy. "Easy an' lively! If der ole gal wakes 'fore yer git me free, der hull t'ing is dished! Unhook yer feets an' git at dese strings!"

The girl lost no time in obeying, but the strength seemed gone from her fingers, and she did not make such swift progress as she might have done otherwise.

Scrimpy could scarcely keep back a groan of impatience.

The instant she had released his hands he sat up and went for the knots at his feet himself.

In a short time, he was free.

"Now we'll make a big fight, if der king crook shows his nose," he grinned.

"Oh, let's hurry and get out of here!" panted the girl, her limbs trembling under her. "I fear my strength will give out entirely!"

"Don't let it do dat! Keep a stiff upper lip!"

He secured the oil lamp.

"I reckon we'd best go out by der reg'ler way," he said. "Mebbe dat'll be der easiest."

But just then they heard sounds that sent the blood from their faces to their hearts.

Someone was coming!

"Dis way!" hissed the gamin. "We'll skip by der hole t'rough der wall!"

He grasped the girl by the arm, holding the lamp in his other hand, and assisted her through the opening in the wall. But when the other side was reached he was at a loss which way to turn.

"Dashed if I hain't fergot which way dat crazy coon took me inter dis place!" he muttered.

"Oh, hurry, hurry!" panted the trembling girl. "We shall be overtaken!"

Scrimpy knew there was danger of such a thing, for he now heard some one at the very door of the cellar they had just left. However, he had no intention of surrendering without a desperate battle, providing their enemies should come upon them.

Not a moment was to be lost, and so he started through the cellar at random, trusting to chance.

A moment later they heard the voice of Bry Rockvelt in the cellar they had so lately left. He was cursing the darkness and calling to Mother Mumm.

The sound of the man's voice nearly overcame the girl, but Scrimpy encouraged her with a whispered word.

They came to a wall, along which the boy made his way, looking for an opening.

Finally they came to a narrow passage, which Scrimpy fancied must be the one by which Dr. Strange had led him into the cellar, so he did not hesitate about turning into it.

Barely were they within the passage when they heard Rockvelt's voice in the big cellar they had just left.

He was not alone, for they distinguished the voices of others, and directly, Scrimpy whispered:

"Dat's der bogus Paul Prince wid him! Oh, hain't dey hoppin' now dat dey have missed us!"

The girl could not reply, and the plucky lad feared she would give out entirely. Still he continued to hurry her onward as fast as he could.

The passage was so narrow they could barely squeeze through it at times, and this made Scrimpy think it was the one by which Dr. Strange had led him into the cellar.

Scrimpy looked around, dazed.

"Well, I'd like ter know where we be," he said.

He did not waste much time in speculation, for they heard their pursuers in the passage behind them.

The light in the boy's hand showed them the

mouth of another passage, and Scrimpy began to understand the tunnels from cellar to cellar had been made by thieves and other criminals, who were enabled to escape pursuing officers by dodging from one to another.

Into the next passage they went, finding it difficult to force their way along.

The gamin began to feel that they were nearly cornered.

Suddenly, without the least warning, the ground beneath their feet gave way!

The girl uttered a cry of terror as they fell.

The light was extinguished, and they struck in running water, neither being seriously hurt.

Scrimpy was the first to recover, but it was several moments before he comprehended they had fallen into a sewer.

Then he heard voices above, and he knew Rockvelt and the Plunger were approaching.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, getting hold of the girl's arm in the darkness.

"I think not," she faintly replied. "But I am so frightened. What has happened?"

"We've took a tumble in de sewer. Der sooner we git out of dis locality der better it'll be fer us. Dem two blokes is comin'."

That was enough to nerve the girl so that she sprung to her feet. As he arose, Scrimpy's hand closed on the lamp, and he held to it. Then he again got hold of the girl's arm, and they hurried up the sewer.

They did not go far before the girl sunk down exhausted, and then Scrimpy felt around for some matches. He found them, and, to his delight, they were not wet.

Striking a match, he examined the lamp, finding the only damage done to it was the breaking of the chimney. He was able to light the wick, and their dismal surroundings were illumined.

The girl lay shuddering and moaning, her feet in the inky water that flowed so noiselessly through the dark underground channel. She seemed entirely overcome, and Scrimpy did not wonder at it.

"She'd never stood it dis long if she hadn't been made of der clean grit," he said to himself. "I'm afeared we're bote in a hole w'at dere ain't no gittin' out of."

The prospect was not encouraging.

The plucky lad did his best to cheer the girl, and after a time, he induced her to get on her feet.

"We must try ter find some way out of dis," he said, although in his heart he doubted their ability to do so. "We can't stay here long. Dere hain't much water runnin' now, but dere'll be plenty w'en it comes day."

Once more they moved up the course of the sewer, the boy holding the light and aiding the girl along.

"Hello, there!"

They were both startled and amazed to hear a hollow voice hail them. The girl uttered a shriek and came near fainting.

"Don't be frightened," said the voice in the darkness. "I am not at all dangerous. How are you feeling this delightful evening, Scrimps?"

"Holy poker!" yelled the boy, in wild delight, as a form advanced toward them from the darkness. "It's der boss—it's Double-voice Dan!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GETTING OUT.

It is impossible to describe the astonishment of the gamin upon discovering his employer there in the great sewer. Even after he had declared it was "der boss" he felt doubts concerning the identity of the mud-covered figure that advanced into the light.

"Is dis really youse?" he asked.

"Well, I should say so—what's left of me. But I'd never known you, Scrimps, if I had not recognized your voice. You look as if you had been through a cyclone."

"Well, I feel dat way—only it was more like a yearthquake. We's took a big tumble inter dis place, an' now we're stuck ter git out."

"That is the trouble with me. Who is this young lady with you?"

"Dis is Miss Selwick, der gal w'at der Plunger an' Bry Rockvelt kidnapped."

Explanations followed, both the Double-voice Detective and his assistant having passed through adventures which made their narrations highly interesting to each other. Their escapes had been little short of marvelous, but they still seemed to be in a bad fix.

"What's ter be did, boss?" asked the boy.

"That sticks me," confessed Dan. "The getting out of this sewer is not going to be so very easy. We might get down to the river before the tide turns and attempt to swim out, but—" He paused and looked at Vira in a manner that Scrimpy fully understood.

The girl was something like an elephant on their hands.

"We'll come out top of der heap some way," said the lad, grimly. "Dem blokes hain't goin' ter down dis combination."

"That's the right kind of talk," nodded the detective. "I told them I might turn up 'on deck' at the end of the game, and I mean to do so somehow. I want to baffle them and see them punished as they deserve."

Scrimpy had told Dan that Vira declared Paul Prince an impostor, but the ventriloquist ferret was not so ready to accept that as possible. It did not seem to him that any one could play the game so perfectly. Paul had only been in Europe a short time, and still Hanson Prince had accepted as his son the one who returned.

Still there were many things that made it look possible that "the Plunger" was not the rightful son of the Diamond Prince. The aged jewel merchant had told of the remarkable change in his boy since his return from abroad, a change he could not understand. That change was easily explained if the present Paul was an impostor.

However, there was little time to think over those things in the sewer. The one thing for consideration was the means of escape.

It was finally agreed that they should make their way as near the mouth of the sewer as possible, and then—what?

That question they could not answer, but Scrimpy and Vira turned back, while Dan accompanied them down the great drain.

In a little while they reached the place where the boy and girl had fallen through, and there they tried to think of some way of reaching the opening and making their way out.

Suddenly Scrimpy uttered a cry.

"Struck it, boss!"

"Center?"

"Dead center."

"How'll we work it?"

"I kin reach up dere from your shoulders."

"Right you are, Scrimps, and up you go."

Show your agility, my boy!"

"What'll I do arter I git up dere?"

"Find a rope that you can let down to me. If there is none at hand, find your way out of the cellar and buy one somewhere. Get one some way. Understand?"

"Bet your socks!"

"All ready, then?"

"All ready."

The gamin was agile as a cat, and it did not take him long to mount to the square shoulders of the detective. It was something of a feat to rise upright and grasp the ragged edge of the broken arch, but he did so successfully.

"Can you swing up?" asked Dan, anxiously.

"I kin try," was the reply.

Scrimpy did try, but the bricks gave way in his hands, and he fell heavily.

"Are you hurt?" anxiously asked the Double-voice Detective, assisting the boy to arise.

"I tink me back is broke in more'n t'ree places," was the doleful answer.

"Won't you be able to try it again?"

"Won't I? Well, you bet yer riches I will! I'm goin' ter work de snap, ur bu'st me suspenders! Dat's der kind of a cat I be!"

The second attempt was successful, and the boy swung himself up through the opening, greatly to the satisfaction and relief of Dan.

Scrimpy looked back and saw the two he had left below. The girl was holding the lamp above her head, and both were looking upward, while the inky water slid silently past at their feet.

"Wish I had dat light," said the boy. "I dunno how I'm ever goin' ter find me way out of dis hole in der dark. I hope I won't run inter Rocky ur Paulus, 'cause if I do I'll knock der corners offen der all two bote of 'em, an' I don't feel like kullin' anybody dis eve."

"We can't get the lamp up to you," said Dan; "so you will have to do without it. If you do not find a rope handy and get outside, grab the first policeman you strike. Tell him the points and bring him back with you. Also bring the rope. Slide."

"All squee. Watch der imitation of a man w'at disappears." And the lively gamin was gone.

While they waited for Scrimpy's return, Dan questioned the girl and succeeded in learning many things of importance. After listening to her story complete, he confessed to himself that it was possible the Paul Prince he knew was an impostor, even though the role was a most daring and remarkable one to play.

What had become of the real Paul?

"It begins to look like one of the most remarkable cases I ever had anything to do with," he muttered, speaking to himself, rather than to his companion. "If it does turn out this fellow is bogus, there will be a wonderful sensation for the papers. The latest scandal in high life will be of minor importance, compared with this."

He took a great interest in the girl, and she soon placed her entire confidence in him. He was a man to win confidence and merit it.

Dan's greatest fear was that Rockvelt or the Plunger would return to the broken sewer before Scrimpy could get back, for he did not have a doubt about the ability of the gamin to find his way out of the cellar and get back to the place.

Fortunately, his fears were not realized. They heard some one approaching, after at least an hour had elapsed, and waited breathlessly.

"Here we is, pard!" cheerfully called Scrimpy, appearing at the break. "We'll have yer out of dere in lessen two shakes."

Two policemen were with him, and they had a light and a stout rope.

Detective Dan and the unfortunate maiden were soon drawn out of the sewer.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

INTERESTING INFORMATION.

SOME hours later, not far from dawn, the Always-on-Deck Detective and Scrimpy, his faithful assistant, were securely ensconced in Dan Downing's office, having reached it by a back way. The curtains were carefully and snugly drawn, so any one on the outside could not possibly obtain a view of the interior.

Dan smiled with satisfaction, as he seated himself in a chair, after having made a complete change of clothing and indulged in a good bath. Scrimpy had also luxuriated in a bath and a shift of clothes, which made a great alteration in his appearance.

"Scrimps, my boy," said the detective, "we have pulled through and are still on the turf."

"Dat's w'at's der matter," cheerfully grinned the gamin, elevating his feet and resting them on the top of another chair, while he tipped his own at a dangerous angle. "I feel so good over dat dat I'll take a smoke at your expense. Fetch out dat box of Mexican Stinkeroes you keeps hid in dat desk."

"That's right," nodded Dan. "If you don't see what you want, call for it."

"Oh, I hain't any bashful ter speak of."

The detective unlocked the desk and brought out a box of fine cigars.

"Dis is der style!" chuckled the boy, as he selected and lighted one. "I reckon dem blokes w'at we're pipin' don't tink we're here doin' of dis trick."

"Well, I should say not," nodded Dan. "They believe us safely done for."

"Well, it takes dead heaps of doin' ter do fer us."

"Right you are, Scrimps!"

"We git down sometimes, but we won't stay down."

"Not at all. I told them I might turn up on deck at the finish of the game, but they sneered at the idea. I am pretty likely to give them a surprise they will not get over."

"I should suse so! Dey'll jest lay right down an' die widout a flutter."

"Oh, I have my doubts about that. They are not the kind to cave so easily. You can bet Bry Rockvelt will keep up as long as there is a straw to cling hold of."

"Der straws is goin' mighty fast."

"That's what," agreed Dan, as he also lighted a cigar. "With this girl we have evidence enough against the gang to put them out of the way. Still, I would like to draw the line a little closer before the trap is sprung."

"I don't reckon dere'll be much trouble 'bout dat."

"There should not be, for they will believe me safely out of the way."

"An' me."

"Yes; and the girl, likewise."

"Won't dere be a howl w'en we all shows up!"

"In all probability there will. The success of the surprise depends on our keeping shady till we are ready to spring the trap."

"We kin do it."

"We can do it long enough to get them dead to rights, at least."

"Oh, we're der jim-joe-joes!" nodded the gamin, tipping his chair still further backward and puffing a dense cloud of smoke into the air. "W'en der crooks of dis town gits ahead of dis combine, all der clocks'll stop an' der solar system'll go back on its record."

"But what sticks me," said Dan, scowling a bit, "is the disappearance of Count Mirabeau. I did not understand that man; there was a mystery about him."

"Sure!"

"He faithfully promised to answer certain questions of mine, and then he vanished. There is something wrong about it."

"I agrees wid yer," gravely bowed the boy. "It's a dead dirty way ter use men of our cloth!"

"I feel as if something had happened to the count."

"Like as not."

"Something seems to tell me so."

"Well, he'd opghter let us know if he's dead or anyting of dat sort."

"It would certainly be very kind of him to inform us if he is dead," smiled Dan.

"It would be der act of a gentleman," nodded Scrimpy, sagely.

Dan now noticed for the first time a letter that had been thrust under the front door of the room. He immediately sprung up and secured it.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What does this mean?"

The writing on the envelope was round, bold and graceful, being that of a man with a steady hand and true eye.

"I wonder what this can be," said the ventriloquist detective, as he tore open the envelope and pulled out some closely-written sheets.

A strange look passed over his face, as he hastily ran his eyes over the writing, and when he saw the signature at the end, he whistled softly.

"This is of importance, if not a fake," he declared. "But I am suspicious of it."

"W'at's der drift?" inquired Scrimpy.

"I have not exactly got the drift of it; but it is signed by Paul Prince."

"Holy smoke!"

"I will read it aloud."

The following is what Dan read:

"DAN DOWNING, Detective:—

"DEAR SIR:—I have written this letter to be delivered to you in case I remain away from my apartments three consecutive days. If such a thing should occur, it would be because something had happened to me; in all probability, I will be dead. I understand the desperate man I am dealing with, and I know my life will be considered of little worth compared to their safety, if they discover my identity, as they have the best reasons in the world for fearing me, and wishing me out of the way.

"To begin with: I am not a Frenchman, my name is not 'Fabian Mirabeau,' but that is not at all hard to believe when compared with this declaration: I am the real Paul Prince, son of Hanson Prince, the New York diamond merchant. I know this will astound you, and I almost doubt if you will accept it as credible; but, as there is a God in heaven, I swear it is true. The man you know as Paul Prince is an impostor—a dastardly villain!"

"Yowlin' cats!" gasped Scrimpy. "Dis do beat t'under?"

"Well, I should say so!" grimly agreed Dan.

And then the detective continued reading:

"I have played the part of the French count to the best of my ability, although it has been very difficult, especially when I am in the presence of the girl I love, Miss Selwick. I came near betraying my identity to her that night we found her in the power of those damnable oastards. I also came near betraying myself when we came into the presence of her father, who is the white-bearded man that calls himself Doctor Strange."

"May I be jiggered!" gurgled the detective's assistant, fairly gasping for breath.

"You may," said Downing; "and I would like the privilege of having the same jigger get in his work on me. This is simply terrific!"

"It knocks me silly."

"Listen to this:

"I know not just what has happened to Ransom Selwick, but something has plainly unsettled his mind. It was a remarkable thing that he should be there in the same house with his own daughter, and I have marveled at it greatly.

"In order for you to fully understand this explanation or revelation, I must begin at the beginning. I shall not make it long drawn, and still I hope to put everything so clearly you will fully appreciate the possibility of it.

"The name of the man who is now usurping my rightful position as Paul Prince is Ferril Costigan, and I first met him in Paris. We were immediately struck with our resemblance to each other, while those who saw us together were astounded and thought us twin brothers. We became acquainted much too swiftly, and Costigan introduced me to two of his friends—two who are known in New York as Bry Rockvelt and Diamond Bess. The company was merry and I drank—for almost the first time in my life. Drink unloosed my tongue and I told of myself, like the fresh fool that I was. I told them of my father and his wealth, and they plotted boldly.

"I must confess I was fascinated with the woman, who is really the most beautiful of her kind and class. She led me into follies that brought me where I am now, but I am more to blame than any one else, as I should not have stumbled had I done as I ought.

"I will make it brief. It is enough to say I was drugged, and when I came to myself, I was confined in a dungeon, with a hideous creature to guard me. It is not necessary to tell the tortures I endured, but I finally tunneled out of the place. They had told me I was confined there for the murder of a man—one I killed while intoxicated. But I did not believe, even though I could not understand for what other reason I could be kept a prisoner in that horrible hole.

"As I was making my way to freedom, I came upon the guard who had treated me so cruelly. It was his life or my freedom—and he died!

"When I was free, I set about discovering the cause of all that had taken place, and, in time, I learned the whole plot. This, however, was not until I had followed the trio—Costigan, Rockvelt and Diamond Bess—to America. I found them here in New York, and I learned the whole devilish plot. Then I disguised myself as a Frenchman, resolved to bring about the ruin of Costigan and Rockvelt.

"Of course there is some danger of their discovering who I am. If they do, I shall be fortunate to escape with my life. If I am killed, I want you to investigate this business thoroughly, and save my poor father from the clutches of these villainous vampires. If I remain from my room for three days, it will be probably that something serious has taken place, and this letter will be delivered to you. I wish you to probe this affair to the bottom, for I believe you a man to be trusted. My father will reward you well, you may be sure. Do not disregard this appeal!

"Sincerely yours, PAUL PRINCE."

Dan drew a long breath when he had finished reading the letter, and Scrimpy let his feet fall with a heavy thud upon the floor. Then the two leaned forward in their chairs and stared hard into each other's eyes.

Scrimpy was the first to speak:

"Do youse cotton ter dat?"

"I don't know what to think," confessed the detective.

"It soun's pretty straight."

"What do you think of it, my boy?"

"I reckon it's on ther dead level."

Dan studied the letter in silence for two or three minutes, finally observing:

"If it is crooked, I fail to detect the object of the author."

"Dat's w'at's der matter?"

"I suspected that 'count' was not just what he seemed—in fact, I was dead sure of it."

"But Paul Prince—whew!"

"I did not dream he was the diamond merchant's son."

"He made a jolly good Frenchy."

"He played his part well."

"W'at do youse propose ter do?"

"I have not decided; but I shall hold this letter secure, you may believe."

"Dat's der stuff! Hang onter dat, fer it may come in mighty handy."

"I believe I shall call on Hanson Prince."

"Say."

"What?"

"It'll be a dead give-away."

"Think so?"

"Course I do. He don't suspect dis bogus bloke hain't his boy, an' he'll blow yer ter der Plunger. Dat'll let der whole gang onter it dat you's kickin'."

"I will go in disguise."

"I don't see yer lay."

"I will rig up as an Italian, and profess to have seen Paul in Italy."

"W'at yer want ter do it fer?"

"The old man is in danger."

Scrimpy nodded.

"I reckon dat's right."

"This gang is determined to do him."

"Sure."

"I must let him know."

"He'll give it away."

Dan knew there was danger of that, but he thought he could make the Diamond Prince understand the situation well enough to be discreet and still stand on his guard. If driven to a corner, Ferril Costigan would not hesitate to strike at Hanson Prince's life.

The Double-voice Detective retired to that back room and swiftly made himself up as an Italian of the better class, knowing a common "Dago" would not stand the least show of getting into the millionaire merchant's home.

"How you like-a da looka of dis!" he asked of Scrimpy, as he made his bow before the gamin.

"Vera gooda rigga up—eh?"

"You'll pass," assured the boy, approvingly.

"Noa pass; I seea you, goa tena better-rr-rr. I play da bigga game—make-a da elegant bluffa. See?"

"I tumble," nodded Scrimpy.

A few minutes later, the detective's office was deserted.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DAN WARNS THE DIAMOND PRINCE.

It was eleven o'clock in the forenoon when Double-voice Dan, disguised as an Italian, ascended the steps of the Diamond Prince's magnificent residence and rung the bell.

On inquiring for Mr. Prince, however, he was informed the gentleman had left for his store some time before.

"It seems he has not fallen into such very luxurious habits, for all of his wealth," thought the detective, as he turned down the steps.

From the house, Dan went directly to the store. He knew Mr. Prince so well that a single glance showed him the man was not in the front part of the store.

Then he inquired:

"Mr. Prince is busy just at present," assured one of the salesmen. "Will not some one else do as well? Perhaps I can serve you?"

Dan shook his head.

"Noa gooda," he declared. "Have-a to see da bossa. Vera import' biz."

"Then you will have to wait till he is at liberty," curtly declared the clerk.

"Noa can waita," asserted the ferret, who did not fancy being stood off in this manner by the important young man. "Biz notta da kind dat keepa."

"Then it will have to spoil," was the malicious retort. "Please stand away from the case."

"Well, blame your impudent hide!" thought Dan. "I would like to knock a little civility into your wooden head!" At the same time, he was careful to preserve his dialect when he spoke aloud:

"I noa come to foola 'way da time, saire! I tella you da biz is vera import'. Will you tella da gent'man I wanta see him?"

"No, sir, I will not. He would not see you now if I did. You may as well go away."

"Noa go 'way!" excitedly lifting his voice, his purpose being to attract Hanson Prince's attention, if the diamond merchant was within hearing. "I have-a da talk with da Mister Prince, or I know da reason why! You take-a me for chump? You finda outa da mistake! I have-a been rounda little bitta. When I tella you thinga, you better-rr-rr listen to mea!"

"Look here!" angrily exclaimed the salesman. "If you make a disturbance, we will have you taken care of."

"Take-a care of! Can take-a care of myselfa. You think mea foola? Hay-ah!"

As Dan had anticipated, the loud talk brought Hanson Prince from the back room.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, looking keenly at the disguised detective. "Who is this fellow—who is he, I say? What does he want here—what can he want?"

"Mea tella you something 'bout dat forge

check," whispered Dan, reaching a point where the old diamond merchant could understand his words.

Mr. Prince fell back and stared at Downing.

"Forged check!" he gasped. "What—what do you mean—what can you mean?"

"Meana? Forge checka on da banka—make-a da bluffa—gitta da mon'. Oh, I know-a!" And Dan assumed a very wise expression.

Hanson Prince had turned very pale, but he now demanded:

"Who are you?"

"Italian gentleman, saire," was the lofty reply. "Have-a da title to name-a. Noa give-a reason. Don't want-a be know in New Yorka."

"What kind of a check were you talking about?"

Dan glanced around in a significant manner at the watching customers and clerks and Prince understood him.

"Come into my back room," invited the merchant.

Dan had been waiting for that, and he readily followed. There were two other gentlemen in the little room, and the diamond merchant invited the disguised detective to take a seat.

"I will be at liberty in a moment—in a moment, sir," he said, rubbing his hands together, nervously.

Then Prince went over to the two men and spoke with them in a whisper for a few moments, after which they arose to leave.

"Will you send Jackson to me," requested the diamond merchant, of one of the men.

The two departed, and a moment later, one of the employees about the store appeared.

"Jackson," said Hanson Prince, "stand at the door, just outside, where you can instantly answer my call, should I need you."

The clerk bowed and retired.

Then Dan's companion turned and surveyed his visitor closely. His manner was nervous, doubtful, but he came forward and stood before the seeming Italian.

"Well, sir?"

"Thinka it is well! I thinka maybe da odder way."

Mr. Prince coughed.

"What do you mean? Come to the point, sir. I am a man of business. A man of business, sir, has no time to waste. You said something about a check—a forged check. What do you know? What do you want?"

Dan waved his hand.

"Take-a da biz easy," he advised, coolly. "I make-a da bluffa. See?"

The old gentleman scowled.

"I can't say that I do see," he returned, sternly. "No, sir, I do not see! Your manner is offensive, sir—exceedingly offensive."

"I begga da pard'! Noa meana dat. I take-a all dis trub' for you."

Prince looked incredulous.

"Come, come!" he exclaimed. "I know enough of your kind to understand they are not in the habit of doing anything for nothing. Don't try to deceive me, sir—don't try! I am not going to waste my time with you—no, sir! What have you to say?"

"I knowa da young mana."

"Who?"

"Paula."

"My son?"

Dan bowed.

"Impossible!"

"You thinka so?"

"How can it be? When did you ever know him?"

"Mebbe some time-a da long 'go—mebbe in Italy. He go-a over there, eh?"

"What has this to do with the check you spoke of?"

"Nothing, mebbe."

"It is the check I wish to speak of. What do you know about it?"

"Check was give-a—took-a at da bank. Check was forge-a—no-a good-a."

Hanson Prince knit his brows.

"You said as much before. What about this check? Tell me something more."

"You tell-a da Double-voice Dana all 'bout-a it. I know all dat you tell-a."

"And you have come here to extort money from me—that's it! You're a blackmailer!"

"Nothing of da kind-a. I don't want-a da money—have-a da plenta."

The diamond merchant was puzzled.

"Then what do you want, sir—what can you want? I don't see your reason for troubling me."

"Noa see?"

"No."

"Well, I tella you something."

"I am listening."

"I thinka you had better-rr-rr watcha da younga man."

"What do you mean by that?" sternly demanded Hanson Prince, although his face was very pale. "Hang me if I like your insinuations—no, sir, I do not like them!"

Dan had not expected the man would like what he had to say, but he felt as if Hanson Prince should be warned, for the crooks might do something desperate when driven into a corner.

"I come to tella you to looka out for dat boy—keepa da sharpa eye on him."
 "Then you have wasted your time—and mine!"
 "Noa waste-a da time, if you paya da 'tention. I knowa da biz. Double-voice Dana senda me—mebbe. See?"

"Do you mean to say the detective sent you to me?"

The disguised man nodded.

"Mebbe so."

"I do not believe it."

"Thinka I lie? Oh, I noa gitta mada! If I lie, how I knowa so much 'bout dat things—'bout da check?"

"I don't understand how much you know or where you obtained your information; but I am not ready to believe Dan Downing sent such a message by such a messenger. Why didn't he come himself—that's it; why didn't he?"

"Mebbe he noa able. See?"

"I must confess I do not."

"How I make-a you understand? Dat sticka mea. I am on da deada level—on da square."

Still the Diamond Prince was doubtful and suspicious.

"Why should Dan Downing trust you with the secrets he agreed to guard? No, sir—no! I do not understand your game, but I feel sure there is a game back of all this—sure of it."

"Dat where you make-a da bigga mistake. I tella you notta trust Paula—notta let him know anything. Da Double-voice Dana tella mea to say dat. He say he make a bigga revelash' vera soona—knocka da house silly. He gitta da biz down fine-a. Alla da samea, he say for you notta tella you hear from him—say you hear notta from him. See?"

"Why didn't he send this message to me in writing?"

"You don't knowa him. He vera caref'. Write-a give-a da jobba 'way, perhap'. Dat whata da matter. He knowa mea—senda mea."

"Where is he now?"

"On da scent."

"On the scent?"

"Yes."

"If you tell the truth, I am afraid this detective is not what I thought him—a man who could be trusted with secrets."

"He is."

"But he revealed things to you he should not."

"I know ev'rything he know-a. You don't-a be 'fraid-a of me-a. I never-rr-rr go back-a on you-a."

But Hanson Prince was ill at ease. He paced the narrow back room, occasionally casting covetous but searching glances at the disguised detective. Dan understood the man's condition and pitied him.

"You have nothing more to say?" questioned Prince, after some moments.

"Nothing. I go-a now." Dan arose.

"I will see this Downing at once, and ascertain if this is all right," said the old gentleman.

"No-a see him."

"Why not?"

"No-a find-a him."

"How is that?"

"You keep-a still; let-a thing go-a. Tell nothing. All come-a out right-a in da end-a."

A few moments later the detective left the store.

As Dan turned down the street, a figure started out of a doorway on the opposite side and followed, keeping the detective in sight.

"I wonder who in blazes that can be, and what he could want in the back room with the old man?" said the shadower. "I am suspicious, and I think I will follow this person to his hole."

It was Paul.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PLUNGER'S ILL-HUMOR.

THE detective had seen the shadower the moment he started out of the doorway. Dan did not turn his head in the least, but he knew the Plunger was following.

"Very well, my duck," was the ferret's mental observation. "I will simply have to give you the slip."

In no way did he arouse Paul's suspicion, or give the young man reason to believe he was detected. He kept straight on his way till the throng of Fourteenth street was reached, and there he mingled with the drift to be found ceaselessly treading the wide walks.

In at a doorway he suddenly went, and two minutes later he was on Thirteenth street, having passed by the building from one street to the other.

When Paul found he has lost his man he was thoroughly disgusted and angry. Railing inwardly at the luck, he lost no time in making his way to the rooms of Diamond Bess.

Rockvelt was there with the beautiful female crook, and Paul received a hearty greeting.

"How goes it?" asked the gambler, who had been drinking freely.

"Vilely!" was the hot reply.

Rockvelt and the woman started and looked sharply at the young man.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the sport. "We have been congratulating ourselves that everything was going finely."

"Perhaps you think so."

"You do not?"

"I believe there is disaster brewing for us."

"What makes you believe that?"

"I feel it in my bones."

Rockvelt sneered, and the woman laughed derisively. She had also been indulging in wine, and her cheeks were flushed.

"Bah!" she cried, with a vulgar gesture. "You must be getting soft, Ferril!"

The Plunger flung his cane into a corner and dropped on a soft chair.

"I'm not a fool!" he replied, somewhat fiercely. "If you take me for that, you will discover your mistake."

The woman arose and came over to him, placing an arm about his neck, only to have it flung off in an instant, while Paul started from her, as if scorched by her touch.

"Don't put your hands on me!" he hoarsely cried.

She fell back, the picture of consternation.

"What—what ails you?" she gasped.

"I am in no pleasant mood."

Her eyes flashed with insulted anger, and she drew her perfect form to its full height.

"I should say not! You are not in the habit of receiving my caresses in this manner. Why, you are glaring at me as if I were a viper!"

"Viper" is good," he nodded, showing his even teeth. "How could you guess my thoughts so perfectly?"

The color left her face and she literally trembled.

"Do you mean this?" she hoarsely demanded.

"Why not?" he sneered. "I know you for what you are, and that is—"

"Hold hard, Costagan!" growled Bry Rockvelt, his anger mastering the astonishment aroused by the Plunger's odd manner. "You are making dirty talk. Don't forget I am here, and I have an interest in this affair."

"An interest in this woman, you mean," was the quick retort. "I fully understand how much interest you take in her, Rockvelt."

"She is my sister."

"Sister! Pah! Did you ever for a moment imagine you fooled me with that bluff? I am not so very new as all that amounts to, my dear man. I fancy you have the same interest in her that I do."

Rockvelt started from his chair, a savage snarl breaking from his lips; but Paul promptly arose to confront him.

"Sit down!" commanded the Diamond Prince's supposed son. "What do you think of doing?"

"I have a mind to knock the head off you!"

"You never'd be able to do the little job!"

Rockvelt took a step toward the taunting younger man, but Paul promptly prepared to meet the assault.

"You know my reputation, Rock," he said.

"If you wake me up, I'll be pretty sure to do for you."

"I don't want to have trouble with you, Costagan," declared the gambler, hesitatingly; "but I don't propose to listen to you while you insult Bess."

"Then get out of hearing," calmly advised the younger. "I have wanted to free my mind for some time, and it had to come to-day. I reckon Bess can stand it."

"If you don't swallow your words, I will kill you!" came hoarsely from the woman's throat.

"Then I'm as good as dead, for I am not doing the swallowing act. Don't kick at the plain truth, woman! You are as bad as any of us, and we are simply a precious trio of miserable crooks. I know you have been accustomed to hearing sweetened words from my lips, and so what I just said must have hit you right where you live. All the same, it was no worse than you deserve, and you know it."

She panted for breath, while her eyes shone like twin stars. Her white hands worked convulsively.

"Oh, the time will come when I'll be even for this!" she grated.

"All right; let it go at that. I am willing. Just now, let's talk over the situation. Sit down, Rockvelt; you look tired."

As if the trouble was settled, Paul again flung himself into a chair. For a moment it seemed doubtful whether the gambler would sit down or attempt to take the Plunger at an advantage before he could get out of the chair. Paul seemed utterly regardless of the other man's uncertainty, and, with a harsh growl, Rockvelt sunk back in his easy seat.

Diamond Bess covered her face with her hands, and her whole form shook with suppressed emotion.

Paul carelessly drew forth a cigar-case and lighted a weed, seeming greatly relieved, now that he had expressed his feelings.

The woman sat down, but she was still pale, and her heart was burning with rage. Ever before Paul had delighted in her caresses, and his lips had spoken naught but the sweetest words of languishment. She could not understand the sudden change that had come over him, for he seemed quite like a different person.

Growling in his throat, Rockvelt filled a glass with wine, and dashed it off at a swallow. He did not offer any to Paul, and the Plunger did not appear to notice the drink at all.

"What in blazes do you mean by saying things are going vilely?" demanded the sport, by way of getting the conversation into another channel. "Why, everything has come our way!"

"How?"

"How! Great Scott! Why do you ask such an idiotic question? Didn't you see Paul Prince done for?"

"Sure."

"You said you got a man to finish him off, but you haven't told me who your man was."

"Tonk Smike."

"The worst cut-throat in New York!"

"Just the man for the job."

"That is so; but he may come back on you."

"He can't."

"Why not?"

"I was disguised."

"So? Well, I don't see how you got him to take such a job, seeing he did not know you."

"I gave him the signal word of the Why-ohs. You know it is his secret boast that he belonged to the original gang, and I guess he tells the truth. He was ready for the job as soon as I gave him the word."

"Did you see him finish the job?"

The Plunger blew out a curling ribbon of blue smoke.

"I did," was his reply.

"How did he work it?"

"Oh, what's the use to go all over it again!" pettishly exclaimed Paul. "Haven't I told you everything there is to tell?"

"Not at all, as you very well know. You simply told me you had put the fellow out of the way. At first you led me to believe you did the job yourself, as you were probably ashamed to confess you did not have the nerve to carry it out. It was only last night you acknowledged you hired a cut-throat to kill Prince. We did not have time then to discuss it at all."

"Oh, very well! It is a jolly thing to talk of! What do you want to know?"

"How Smike wiped him out."

"He simply cut Paul Prince's throat from ear to ear."

"Good! The work was well done!"

"In order to make sure, he stabbed him to the heart."

"You saw this?"

"Didn't I tell you so? Do you think I would take the word of such a rascal as Smike? I saw it all, and then I saw the body dropped through a man-hole into a sewer."

"That is three victims the sewer claimed. The girl and that infernal boy fell through into the sewer last night, and their bodies must be in the East River now. The rats of Mike Dolby's cellar had a good feed off that cursed detective Double-voice Dan, and every obstacle is removed from our path. Costagan, you must be going crazy when you say things are working vilely. I'm blown if I understand you at all!"

"I know these people are out of our way," said the Plunger; "but all the same, I feel as if there is going to be an earthquake directly. I almost wish I had never taken a hand in this wretched plot."

A sneering laugh came from Diamond Bess's lips.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A DESPERATE SCHEME.

"HE has lost his nerve, as well as his decency," asserted the woman, her voice sounding harsh and unnatural. "We have no use for cowards."

"Coward, eh? Did I show cowardice in jumping Paul Prince?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"You did; you crept on him from behind and struck him down with a sand-bag—a coward's weapon!"

The Plunger laughed, but there did not seem much merriment in the sound.

"I suppose you boast of your own nerve?"

"I do not boast of it, but I show it."

"How?"

"Do you ask that, after last night? Didn't I go with you to that wretched cellar and render assistance in snuffing out the detective?"

"Oh, you came along; but what was that? What did you do?"

"Held a light. I was the only one whose face he saw, though he named the rest of you. He did not know me till he ripped off my mask. Lots of good may the knowledge do him, now he is food for rats! I had a grudge against him for having me pulled once on a time, and I was willing he should know me just as he went down to death."

"You talk bold enough now, but I fancy it is all talk. It is not such a very bold thing to go into a cellar with two other men—"

"Three; you forget."

"Well, three. It is not such a very bold thing to do that when you are only to confront one helpless man."

"You talk as if a woman should have nerves of iron!"

"He talks like a cursed fool to-day!" snapped Rockvelt, glaring at the younger man.

"I am simply regulating my talk to the capacity of those I am with," was the cutting retort.

"Well, by—"
 "Don't swear, Rockvelt! You make me tired when you do!"
 The gambler fairly gasped for breath.
 "I tell you what's the matter, Costagan," he foamed. "I am not going to take any more of this. I'll be hanged if I do not jump you, if you keep it up! It seems as if you were spoiling for a fuss!"

"Perhaps I am."
 "What for? You have been used all right."
 "I have been used as a tool for you two to fatten over. Did you think me blind? I am getting tired of it, and I'm inclined to make a bolt."

Rockvelt turned black in the face.
 "Why, you blooming chump!" he cried. "Just when we have everything in our fingers you think of bolting! You must be getting foolish!"

"You can go on with the game."
 "That is nice kind of talk to make! How can we go on with it without you?"

"Then you acknowledge I am necessary?"

"Of course."

"As a tool?"

"As one who shares equally in wealth to be obtained."

"I am only to have an equal share with you two, and still I take all the risk."

"How do you make that out?"

"Why, if it should be discovered that I am not the real Paul, I would be instantly pulled. You two would have time to take the alarm and vanish."

"There is not one chance in a hundred that you will be pulled. You have worked the game to a T, and this is the first time you have talked in such a ridiculous manner. It really does seem as if you were losing your nerve, as Bess says."

"I wish you stood in my shoes for a little while. It is not a very nerve-soothing thing to have a man pop up in the manner Paul Prince did. And the fellow had nearly completed the web he was weaving around us. Had I not followed him to this room, he would have finished it."

"How?"

"By inducing this woman to turn against us in order to save herself."

"You lie!" Bess savagely cried. "You know better!"

"But you were promising when I appeared at the portieres."

"I was doing that to deceive him."

The Plunger laughed, sneeringly.

"So you say; but you were on your knees at his feet. Why, you were ready to do anything! Your heart was in your mouth, and every drop of blood had left your face. It was then I first felt the disgust for you that has been growing ever since."

"You dog! And a hundred times you have told me how much you loved me! I will kill you yet!"

Her savage fury quite overcame her, and she burst into tears.

The Plunger showed his teeth in a satisfied smile, and Rockvelt looked as if he would like to fasten his hands on Paul's throat.

"Don't you think you have carried this thing far enough?" he asked, restraining his feelings as much as possible. "You ought to be ashamed!"

The younger man lay back in the easy-chair after a lazy fashion and watched the rings of smoke he sent floating upward, not even appearing to hear the gambler's question.

For a time, only the convulsive sobbing of the woman was heard; but she gradually grew calmer. When she had entirely ceased to shed tears, Paul said:

"I have a scheme."

As no one questioned him, he went on:

"I have told you that I feel as if an earthquake is impending, and that is why I have formed this scheme. If the eruption should take place now, and we were fortunate enough to escape destruction, we would have mighty little to show for our trouble."

"That's so," acknowledged Rockvelt. "We've lived and had a plenty, but we've stacked nothing for future reference."

"That's what I was driving at. Now I propose to make a big scoop and make it this very coming night."

"How?"

"I have a plan that will work. You won't think I am losing my nerve so very much when you hear it."

"Give us the spread."

"It's to rob the old man's store."

"Rob old Prince?"

"Yes."

"It can't be done."

"Why not?"

"He has two watchmen in the store."

"One of them is my duck."

"What do you mean?"

"I have sounded him. You see, it happened I knew the fellow some years ago when he sailed under another name. How he ever obtained his present position of trust is what knocks me."

"Was he crooked?"

"He was the slickest cracksmen I ever knew; but he has been sharp enough not to be detected and exposed."

Rockvelt knit his brows.

"How does it happen you have never spoken of this before?"

"I was not sure of my man till this very day, though I have been working him up for a long time."

"You are certain this is all straight?"

"Dead certain."

"What about the other watchman?"

"Wallace will attend to him."

"How?"

"He likes a drink now and then."

"Well?"

"My man proposes to stand treat."

"He will be drugged?"

"You have guessed it."

Still Rockvelt was not fully satisfied. The plan was new, and there were some things about it he did not like.

"I don't fancy your sudden taking of things into your own hands," he declared. "This scheme is all right as a last resort; but there are heaps of danger in it, and I can't say I am pleased with it. You should have talked it over with me before going into it so far."

Paul waved his hand, the half-smoked cigar between his fingers.

"Come down, Rockvelt!" he laughed. "You have been posing as chief of this gang long enough, and I have been doing the dirty work till I am disgusted. I propose to show you there are others besides yourself who have some brains."

"Confound you!" snarled the angered sport. "You seem to have suddenly been attacked by swelled head. You will ruin everything!"

"That's where you are mistaken, partner. I want to show you I can occasionally give you points."

"What if I refuse to go into this trick you have planned?"

"You won't."

"Why not?"

"For the best of reasons."

"What are they?"

"Chief of them all is that I shall work the pull alone if you refuse."

Rockvelt fumed again, while the Plunger continued calmly smoking, waiting for the gambler to cool down.

"We may as well throw up the whole business!" declared the sport, pacing up and down the room. "Too many cooks spoil the broth!"

"You can throw it up, if you please; but I am in to win. I do not propose to let the present opportunity go by for something vaguely indefinite in the remote future, and you will not, if you are wise."

"Well, I suppose you will ruin everything, if I do not agree."

"Then you are in?"

"Yes. But how do you propose to get into the safe?"

"My man has the combination."

"And your man may blow this whole affair."

"I assure you, he will do nothing of the kind. We will be let in by the back way, and everything will be worked as slickly as can be. There will be no slip-up in my plans, I can assure you."

"At what hour do you propose to make the break?"

"You two should be on hand at 1:30."

"We two! What do you mean by that? Bess will not take a hand in this."

"Oh, yes, she will! She is so very nervy, you know. Besides that I want to have her where she will not dare blow on us. As it is, she might take a fancy to give us away, and, having done nothing so very bad herself, she would get off scot free. She has a grip on me, for she saw me knock over Paul Prince, and I want a hold on her, in turn."

"What if I refuse to give you one?"

"I don't think you will refuse. You have said you show your nerve, and now I want you to give an exhibition of it. You can be on hand in masculine disguise."

"I will not!"

The Plunger waved his hand.

"Very well; that lets you out. The pull is to be diamonds, but not a sparkler do you get unless you take a hand. Come, come, Bess! When I saw you cowering at Paul Prince's feet I lost much of my respect for you; but if you brace up and take a hand to-night, I may love you again as of old."

That touched her.

"Really, Ferril?"

"Why, surely!"

"And you will take back all the cruel words you have spoken?"

"Every one."

"Then I will do my best. You shall not think me a coward, even though I am a woman."

"Good enough! There will be some danger, but what is life without ventures?"

His manner seemed suddenly changed, and he soon had both the gambler and the woman in better spirits.

"You hadn't better drink any more wine, Rockvelt," he said. "You want a clear head to-night. The best thing you can do is get two or three hours' sleep. That is what I intend to do. We will make a jolly haul to-night, and no suspicion will fall on Hanson Prince's son."

For an hour they discussed the proposed robbery, fully perfecting their plans. When Rockvelt proposed that they drink to the success of the plot, the Plunger firmly refused.

"Not a swallow of liquor or wine goes down my throat to-day," he declared. "I mean to have a clear head to-night."

Then he left Rockvelt and Diamond Bess together.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TRAP IS SET.

"HEY dere, boss, by a pape!"

It was Scrimpy in the guise of a ragged and dirty newsboy, and he had hailed Dan Downing, who was still rigged out as the Italian.

The detective instantly recognized his assistant, and a covert signal passed between them.

"Noa buy da paper-rr," replied Dan. "Noa reada da English. Gitta out da way!"

"Bet a dollar you can't read anything," chuckled the gamin, moving cautiously off.

"Where is your monkey?"

"What meana by dat?" asked the ferret, in apparent anger. "Mea noa have da monk? Greta Scotta! what you take-a mea for?"

"An organ-grinder in disguise. You'd make a good monkey for yerself. Go put dat face in pawn!"

"I knocka da stuff outa you!" howled Dan, as he made a dash for the lad, who promptly fled.

The detective leisurely followed, muttering to himself and pretending to be very angry. All the time he was taking care to keep Scrimpy in sight, well knowing the lad had something of importance to communicate.

The shrewd gamin did not look back, feeling sure his employer had understood his signal and was following. Into a cellar saloon he went, and when Dan appeared and ordered a beer, he again approached him under guise of trying to sell a paper.

This time Dan bought one, and Scrimpy immediately went out. Cautiously opening the paper, the detective discovered a sealed envelope, which he secured, observing his own name written on it.

He soon found an opportunity to open the envelope and draw forth the sheet of foolscap inclosed.

This is what was written on the paper:

"DAN DOWNING, Detective:—

"SIR:—The time has come for you to spring your trap and expose the bogus Paul Prince. You can delay no longer, for delay means disaster to Hanson Prince. It is planned that to-night the diamond merchant will be robbed. His store is to be entered between one and two o'clock, and the safe pilfered of jewels. You should be on hand, with assistants, to prevent the success of the scheme and capture the entire cohort. You had better take Hanson Prince into your confidence, and get him to allow you and your assistants to secrete yourselves in the store. He need not know his supposed son will take a hand in the job. The revelation will come when the conspirators are captured. Do not fail.

"AN UNKNOWN FRIEND."

Dan was astounded.

"Great Jupiter!" he muttered. "Can this be on the dead level?"

He was inclined to regard the communication with suspicion, and still he could not see the object of it all if it was a "fake."

"Who is this 'Unknown Friend?'" thought Dan. "If this is on the square, why wasn't it signed by the real name of the writer?"

The detective spent very little time in meditating over it, but hastened from the cellar, leaving his beer untasted to fall into the clutch of a thirsty hummer who had been greedily watching it.

Scrimpy was waiting outside, and, seeing there was no one near to hear what passed between them, Dan asked:

"Where did you get that letter?"

"Kid chucked it in me han'."

"A kid?"

"Yep."

"A messenger boy?"

"Nary. Jest a common street-prowler."

"What became of him?"

"He skipped an' give me der dodge 'for' I could ax where he got der letter ur why he brung it ter me."

"Come to the Morton House in an hour and ask for Herman Westford."

"In dis rig?"

"No; get into the best clothes you own."

"All squee."

Then they parted.

Dan knew better than to visit any of the places he sometimes frequented, but he made all haste to the store of a ready-made clothing dealer with whom he was acquainted. There he purchased a full suit of clothes and put them on. With the addition of a beard and wig he had taken from his office for use in case of emergency, his appearance was completely changed. He now seemed like a well-to-do gentleman from the rural districts; not a green countryman, but a person none too familiar with the sights and ways of the great city.

He then went directly to the Morton House on Union Square, and registered as "Herman Westford, Hoboken, N. J."

Scrimpy was not far behind, for barely was Dan settled in a room before the boy appeared, looking as spruce as a young dandy.

"Well, you made a lively shift from the rig I saw you in last!" exclaimed Dan.

"Hully gee!" cried the boy. "I should say you c'd take dat ter yerself! Youse don't look much like der Dago I sold a pape' ter in Shockey's saloon an hour ago.—W'at's der racket, boss?"

Dan told him to sit down, then he read the letter aloud.

"What do you think of that?" he asked.

"Dere's somet'in' in it," was the prompt answer.

"Think so?"

"Dat's w'at I do."

"Well, there may be. I can't see that it will do any harm to presume there is something in it."

They discussed the situation for some time, and then Dan said:

"I want you to take a note to Hanson Prince. I have been to see the man once to-day, and I do not care to venture about the place again, even though I am in a different disguise. I should have to reveal myself to him, and I might be heard by parties I wish to believe me dead."

"I'll take der note, boss; but you know I'm s'posed ter be defunct."

"They will not be liable to tumble to you, if you do not make yourself too conspicuous. Rockvelt is the only one who saw you last night, and then it was by the wretched light of a smoking lamp. Just deliver the note and then vanish."

"Dat's w'at I'll do."

Dan rung and called for writing materials. In a short time the note was written and dispatched by the faithful Scrimpy.

The boy took care to place it in Hanson Prince's hands, and then, following instructions, he "vanished" before he could be questioned.

After reading the note, the Diamond Prince did not waste much time in getting to the Morton House and calling for Herman Westford.

"You see I came at once, sir—at once," he said, as he greeted the detective, who had made himself known when Prince failed to recognize him. "You said it was of the utmost importance that I did so."

"And so it is," assured Dan. "Sit down."

"No, sir—no. I could not remain quiet. I am all nerved up! I feel that something is going wrong. I have been desiring to see you. Why in the world did you send an Italian to me with such a message?"

"I sent the message by my assistant, Scrimpy—a boy."

"Oh, not that—that's not what I mean! Before, before! The warning. Sir, I fear I have placed too much confidence in you. You have betrayed my secrets to another."

"That is where you are mistaken."

"But this Italian knew all about the forged check."

"Of which you told him, yourself."

"I, sir—I? You must be deranged! I never told him anything of the sort!"

"You certainly did, for that Italian was myself in disguise."

Mr. Prince nearly fainted.

"Impossible!" he cried.

But Dan finally convinced him. Then the detective added:

"I have a matter of vastly more importance to tell you, Mr. Prince. That is why I summoned you here. I should have gone to you, but just at present, I am supposed to be dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. Last night I was killed by four persons."

"Oh, come, sir—"

"They supposed they killed me and left me as food for rats. I want them to continue thinking so till I work a grand surprise on them."

"To-night they are going to rob your safe."

The old gentleman fairly staggered.

"Rob—my—safe!" he echoed. "Do you really mean that?"

"Well, I am not dead certain of this, but I have been led to believe it possible. That is why I sent for you. We must trap these fellows, if it is really true."

"Trap them! I should say so! But they cannot get at my safe, sir—no, sir! It is guarded—guarded by two faithful watchmen."

"I know nothing of that, but I have been informed the attempt will be made. We must be on hand."

"I should say so—yes I should! But who are these rascals—who are they, sir?"

"That you will discover, if they appear to-night."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Lay for them."

"Where?"

"In your store."

"And catch them in the act?"

"Exactly."

"A good plan, sir—good plan."

"I am glad you think so. Now sit down here, and we will perfect it."

Hanson Prince did as directed, and the plot for capturing the would-be cracksmen was carefully perfected. Everything had been arranged when the old gentleman left the hotel, thirty minutes later.

When the time came to close the store that night, Hanson Prince knew that Double-voice Dan and three trusty companions of the regular police force were secreted where they could watch the safe.

Mr. Prince went home, in order to throw suspicion, but returned within an hour, and was admitted by the back way.

It was somewhat singular that neither of the watchmen seemed to consider it at all strange that so many men had concealed themselves in the store. They asked no questions, and seemed satisfied with the curt explanation made by Mr. Prince.

It was more than an hour past midnight that one of the watchmen stole cautiously to the back door, on which he heard an odd tapping. His companion kept carefully out of sight. The man on the inside of the door turned the heavy key in the lock, threw back the strong bolts and removed the double chain. When he opened the door slightly, a cautious whisper came to his ears:

"All right?"

"All right," he whispered back. "Dorman is in a sound snooze, and the coast is clear."

Then he opened the door and, one by one, four figures stole in.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TRAP SPRUNG—DAN ON DECK.

ONE of the four would-be robbers was kneeling in front of the big safe when, all of a sudden, there was a bright click, and the whole interior of the store was brightly illuminated by a dozen electric lights.

The four burglars were revealed, their faces hidden by masks.

Up sprung Dan Downing and his assistants.

"The first one who tries to make a break will be shot dead!" cried Dan, leveling a cocked revolver at the head of one of the robbers.

"Dat's w'at's der matter wid ole Hannah!" piped Scrimpy, showing up with a Colt's six-shooter in his fist.

"Great God!" gasped Rockvelt, seeming thunderstruck by the appearance of the detective.

"Dan Downing—alive!"

"Alive and on deck, my fine jail-bird!" was the reply. "I told you it might come out this way.—Seize them, officers!"

The policemen sprang forward to obey, but Battery Ben—who was one of the four—was not sufficiently overcome by the astounding appearance of the man they believed dead to give up without a struggle.

"Curse you, Downing!" he snarled, snatching out a revolver. "I'll bore you, fer keeps!"

Then he fired!

Almost at the very instant the weapon was discharged—a trifle before—one of his masked companions dashed his arm upward, and the bullet flew over the detective's head. Then the hard fist of this masked man struck the Battery Bird under the ear and knocked him sprawling, where he was quickly secured by one of the policemen.

"Fire and fury!" yelled Rockvelt. "Costagan has turned traitor!"

Even as the gambler uttered the cry, the one who had knocked Battery Ben over flung himself on the spot.

A fierce but brief struggle ensued, during which the masks of both men were torn off. Then both were secured by Dan and the officers.

Diamond Bess, in male attire, had attempted to slink away, but had been easily captured.

When Hanson Prince saw the face of the one who had knocked Battery Ben over and assaulted Rockvelt, he screamed:

"My son!—my God! my son!"

"Yes, father," was the calm reply, "I am your son; but I am not the damnable wretch whom you have known as son for many months! Wallace, bring him out."

Then one of the watchmen appeared, dragging along a man whose hands were secured behind him and in whose mouth was a gag.

A cry of astonishment went up when they saw this person, for he was the double of the man held secure by the officer!

"What can this mean?" gasped Hanson Prince, staring from one to the other. "Do my eyes deceive me? Am I going mad?"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Double-voice Dan. "One of these fellows is the genuine Paul Prince—but which one?"

"Let that fellow answer," said the man held by the officer, pointing at his counterpart.

"Wallace, remove the gag."

The watchman obeyed, and, as soon as the captive could work his jaws, he groaned:

"It's all over, Rockvelt—the game is up! We may as well throw up the sponge!"

"You fool!" snarled the gambler. "I thought you said Paul Prince was dead?"

"And so I supposed. Tony Smike played me false, curse him! He swore he cut the fellow's throat, but he left him free."

"Because I saved him from drowning in the East River one time years ago. He remembered and was grateful. He spared my life, and I have been able to baffle your vile plot and catch you in this trap."

"But I do not understand this," faltered Hanson Prince—"no, sir, I do not! What does it mean?"

Paul—the real Paul—briefly told his father how he had been duped by an impostor; but the story seemed almost too much for Hanson Prince to swallow.

"But how come you here—in his place?" he questioned.

"I snared him yesterday morning and exchanged clothes with him. I had already made myself known to Wallace and convinced him I was really the rightful Paul. He agreed to aid me in this plot to insure the whole gang at one swoop, and you can see how well everything worked."

"Then you were the person who wrote me of the intended robbery?" questioned Dan.

"I am. I knew you could be depended on."

Mr. Prince still seemed confused, so Paul tore open the front of his shirt and showed a scar upon his breast.

"You must remember that, father!" he cried.

"Yes, yes!" came thickly from the old gentleman's throat; "I remember it—I remember! You are really and truly my boy!"

"I am."

"Release him, officer," commanded Dan.

A moment later, father and son were clasped in each other's arms.

The following day, the papers were filled with a very sensational story, the garnished facts of the capture being given, as well as the narrative of the remarkable deception practiced on Hanson Prince by the scoundrel Ferril Costagan.

Dan Downing declared the reporters were inclined to give him too much credit, for he said Paul Prince had "worked out his own salvation." It had given Dan unlimited satisfaction to come in "on deck" at the end of the game, but he was not at all inclined to claim any great amount of glory.

"Oh, you're too modest—dat's w'at's der matter wid youse!" asserted Scrimpy. "I tells yer, modesty don't pay in dis world. Der feller w'at gits dere wid bote feet hain't der chap w'at's retirin' an' backward. Some of dese chumps w'at don't amount ter fush gits a brace on an' makes a bluff an' jest takes der places w'at b'longs ter some feller w'at nobody pays any 'tention to. I tells yer, I kin stan' all der glory dey kin heap on der firm of Downin' an' Stubbs."

Finding there was no escape, Diamond Bess had shown unexpected nerve.

"This is a killer for me," she confessed. "Of course I'll go to the jug again, and that means ruin!"

Rockvelt cursed the luck, while Battery Ben remained silent and sullen. Ferril Costagan broke down and made easy work for justice by full confession.

All four were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, the woman receiving the shortest period of them all.

Justice was satisfied.

There was an affecting meeting between Paul Prince and his sweetheart, little Vira Selwick.

"Dear, dear girl!" said the young man, as he tenderly held her in his arms. "How much you must have suffered! The clouds must have been thickly about you, but they are banished now."

"Not all of them, Paul," she replied. "My father—"

"Ah, yes! I had almost forgotten him."

"If I only knew his fate! I fear he is dead, and yet—"

"We will hope for the best, darling. How did he happen to leave you?"

"I don't know; but he went away in a very singular manner. I have fancied he was decoyed away by that impostor who was impersonating you."

"What could have been the villain's object?"

"I think father suspected him, and he knew it. He feared father would expose him."

"If this is true, Ferril Costagan will acknowledge it, for he is quite broken down and heartless."

And when he was questioned, Costagan confessed that Ransom Selwick had really been drugged and kidnapped.

The drug had worked strangely on him, for it had turned his brain and caused him to believe himself a great doctor—Dr. Strange. With the craft of a madman he had given his captors the slip, but he had not returned to his home or his daughter.

Double-voice Dan and Scrimpy set about the task of finding the deranged man, and succeeded. Selwick was in a pitiable condition, the result of exposure and want of food; but weeks of careful nursing brought him round, and restored his shattered mind. He found a pleasant home with Paul and Vira, who became husband and wife, with the blessing of Hanson Prince.

Paul is a rising artist, for he works for art's sake alone, not being compelled to prostitute his talents for bread. This gives him a chance to bring out the very best there is in his soul.

Dan Downing is still "on deck," respected and honored by honest men, hated and feared by rogues. Scrimpy remains his "right-hand man."

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351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
302 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Man 'Way Back.
249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
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28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 714 Gabe Gall, the Gambler from Great Hump.
703 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.
692 Dead-Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.
655 Strawberry Sam, the Man with the Birthmark.
646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.
638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.
611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
585 Dan Dixon's Double.
575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honey Suckle.
551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
539 Old Doubledark, the Willy Detective.
531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
470 The Duke of Dakota.
463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
385 Wild Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
279 The Gold Dragoon, or, California Bloodhound.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

- 709 Lodestone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.
695 Singer Sam, the Pilgrim Detective.
688 The River Rustlers.
673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
528 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

- 704 Invisible Ivan, the Wizard Detective.
685 The Red-skin Sea Rover.
679 Revello, the Pirate Cruiser; or, The Rival Rovers.
672 The Red Raper; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.
662 The Jew Detective; or, The Beautiful Convict.
658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigris of Texas.
653 The Lasso King's League. A companion Story to "Buck Taylor, the Saddle King."
640 The Rov'r's Retribution.
635 The Ex Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.
630 The Sea Thief.
625 Red Wings; or, The Gold Seekers of the Bahamas.
615 The Three Buccaneers.
610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.
605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
600 The Silver Ship; or, The Sea Scouts of '76.
593 The Sea Rebel; or, Red Rovers of the Revolution.
587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.
581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
560 The Man from Mexico.
553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
530 The Savages of the Sea.
524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
493 The Scouts of the Sea.
489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.
482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.
476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, the Red Sea Raider.
469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, the Fugitive Sailor.
457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
399 The New Monte Cristo.
393 The Convict Captain.
388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
341 The Sea Desperado.
336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
259 Outlaw and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trail.
128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

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Numbers * are from the pen of Buffalo Bill.

- 710 Buffalo Bill Baffled.
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail.
682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
649 Buck Taylor, the Saddle King.
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza.
*639 The Gold King; or, Montebello, the Magnificent.
629 Daredeath Dick; or, Buffalo Bill's Daring Role.
*599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pards of the Plains.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
*414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
*401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
*397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
*394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
*319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
*304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
*243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
158 The Doomed Dozen; or, Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.
*83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
*53 Death-Trailer, the Chief of Scouts.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 448 Hark Kenton, the Traitor.
185 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena.
156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.
142 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.
117 Dashing Dandy; or, The Hotspur of the Hills.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 708 Joe Phenix's Siren.
700 Joe Phenix's Unknown.
681 Joe Phenix's Specials.
674 Uncle Sun Up, the Born Detective.
670 The Lightweight Detective.
665 The Frisco Detective; or, The Golden Gate Find.
660 The Fresh in Montana.
652 Jac-son Blake, the Bouncer Detective.
647 The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fe.
637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.
632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.
628 Joe Phenix's Combine.
620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.
613 Keen Billy, the Sport.
607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.
594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
586 The Silver Sharp Detective.
577 Tom of California.
570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevalier.
537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
529 The Fresh in New York.
520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
497 The Fresh in Texas.
490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
465 The Actor Detective.
461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the Era.
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
200 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
130 Captain Volcano, or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
101 The Man from New York.
97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.
75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.
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49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
35 Kentuck, the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.
34 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.
33 Overland Kit; or, The Idyl of White Pine.
31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.
598 The Dominie Detective.
591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
580 Shadowing a Shadow.
565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
472 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulp from Texas.
436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.

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